Repeat Your Favorite Mistakes And Love Them All Again

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Age Regression/De-Aging, why am i like this, i just feel like all characters are easier to deal with when they're children, Fluff, Domestic Fluff, teen and up for cussing, mostly Jason's cussing, Kid Fic, BatDad!, Cuddling & Snuggling, Hurt/Comfort, Bruce Wayne is a Good Dad, i mean not good-good but he's really trying, Feel-good, Slow Burn, Sassmaster Alfred, Schmoop, Mild Angst, because it's Bruce and he's like the grandmaster of angst, even in fluffy fics, very mild though, mature chapter 24 and up, but otherwise teen

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by watchingthestars13

Summary

"Oh dear," came Alfred's surprised voice from the stairs, and all of them turned to look at him. His face was a little pale as he stared at all the boys, Jason's huge t-shirt, Tim's dress, Damian wrapped in a spare cape that was in the batmobile. At least Dick was able to fit into Tim's Red Robin pants, and Jason in Damian's Robin pants.
Had Bruce been a lesser man, he would've said 'dear god, help'.
All it took now was for their eyes to meet before Alfred composed himself.

Notes

Hey!
There will be eventual superbat and a bunch of my own and other's headcanons for the tiny children. There will be shenanigans and all of the batboys living under the same roof at very young ages and being little sassy assholes, as they tend to be. There will be feels. Hopefully.
I have a vague plotline for this thing, but how this is going to go? I have no idea. I'm rolling with it. Please do the same.
I am trying to learn Bruce's mindset and how to write him, so this is a little bit of an exploration for me. Bear with me if you think the characters are a little ooc, I need time to adjust and time to feel him out. Thank you.
Enjoy! <3

Chapter 1

"**I want cocoa!**" two-year-old Damian yelled in Farsi, hammering his little fists against Bruce's chestplate.

"What's he saying?" thirteen-year-old Dick asked curiously.

"That he wants cocoa," the startlingly small Tim said quietly from somewhere around Bruce's hip. He was watching Bruce juggle Damian and the panels; big, ocean blue eyes following his every move. Damian hammered his tiny, chubby fists against his breastplate again, and Bruce had to take a deep, deep breath to keep calm. God, what was he going to *do*?

"Alfred?" he said smoothly, pressing the intercom for the kitchen. "Please come down here."

"Right away, Master Bruce," came Alfred's voice, and Bruce grabbed a hold of Jason's too-large t-shirt, the leather jacket left behind in the passenger seat of the batmobile, and tugged him away from the shiny buttons on the panels of the batcomputer.

"Hey!" Jason snapped, swatting after Bruce's hand.

"Don't touch any of the buttons," Bruce growled back, and Jason glared up at him, crossing his arms angrily. Bruce glared back, because he remembered ten-year-old Jason and his tendencies. When Jason's look waivered, Bruce looked away as well, refocusing on Damian's insistent shouting.

"**You'll get cocoa soon, Damian, okay? I promise**," he soothed in Farsi, and Damian's lower lip shot out, trembling slightly. It did tug on his heartstrings, because dammit, he'd never gotten to see this Damian, this small, fiesty little thing that could barely toddle yet, let alone handle a blade.

"Can I hold him?" Dick chirped, and Bruce looked down at him, at scrawny, small, thirteen year old Dick, and saw the sparkle in his dark blue eyes that had practically faded by now.

He looked so happy, happy to be here with Bruce, and that hurt, it really did. At least all of them remembered him, even though there

was no chance Tim would actually know who he was by the time he was seven years old. Jason, he'd only been on the streets for about two years, by now, but he still had that haunted, guarded look. Damian on the other hand, he had his mother's nose and lack of patience, and was currently very ungently trying to gain his father's attention.

"He's cute. What's his name again?"

Dick's voice snapped him out of it, and he was just about to reply when Tim tilted his head and frowned. It was very reminiscent of what he looked like as a teenager, frowning at Damian.

"Damian," Tim said quietly, staring at the toddler with slight apprehension. One of his small hands was intertwined in Batman's cape, and when he'd been practically swimming in his Red Robin outfit, Bruce had put him into one of the t-shirts he had in the batmobile, plain black. On Tim's small frame, it looked more like a dress.

"Hi Damian!" Dick cooed, and took the squirming child out of Bruce's arms with ease. Damian stared at Dick with a cute little pout that reminded Bruce very painfully of Talia, and what her natural thinking face looked like, when she wasn't hiding it.

And then Damian grabbed a hold of Dick's cheeks with his small hands and said, very firmly, and in accented English: "*Cocoa*."

Dick nodded very seriously back.

"Cocoa," he agreed. "Hey, B, I'm gonna take this little guy upstairs for some hot cocoa."

"Stay," Bruce said firmly, and then counted heads as Dick opened his mouth to protest. Dick, Tim, Damian. Three. "Where's Jason?"

Soundlessly, Tim pointed towards their bikes, that had driven themselves back after... The Incident.

Ten-year-old Jason was touching one of them, his slim fingers following the silvery, armed hubcap. He was skinny, and small, too, and that hurt Bruce. To see small Jason, standing there, looking yearning.

"Jason," Bruce barked, and Jason pulled his hand back quickly, turning around and looking innocent.

"What, B?" he asked cheerily, in perfect imitation of Dick. Tim giggled quietly, and then nearly disappeared in Bruce's cape with mortification, and Dick frowned as he stared at Jason, gently bouncing Damian up and down to soothe the small child, who was now content to grab a fistful of Dick's hair and hold on.

"Step away from the bike. I don't want it falling on you."

Jason kicked the bike, and it remained standing.

"Looks sturdy t'me," he said under his breath, and glared again towards Bruce. Bruce sighed.

"Jason, please," he said, and Jason's eyes widened for a second, and then he looked a little shocked. Finally, he looked his age.

"Oh dear," came Alfred's surprised voice from the stairs, and all of them turned to look at him. His face was a little pale as he stared at all the boys, Jason's huge t-shirt, Tim's dress, Damian wrapped in a spare cape that was in the batmobile. At least Dick was able to fit into Tim's Red Robin pants, and Jason in Damian's Robin pants.

Had Bruce been a lesser man, he would've said 'dear god, help'. All it took now was for their eyes to meet before Alfred composed himself.

"It seems we need to find more appropriate clothes for the young masters," he said to Bruce, who sighed.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Alfie!" Dick said happily, dashing over to wrap his arms around the old man's waist. Jason's eyes lit up immediately too, and he took a couple of hesitant steps towards the group before he, more confidently, strode over to Alfred and wrapped his arms around his hips. Alfred's eyebrows rose, but he patted both boys' backs, even giving Damian's baby fuzz a quick stroke with a fond look in his eyes.

"All of them?" Alfred asked over their heads, and Bruce looked down at Tim, still clutching his cape. Tim looked right back.

"Just the boys. I gave the girls a heads up."

"I'm sure Miss Stephanie wants pictures," Alfred said, arching a greying eyebrow, and Bruce expelled an exasperated breath.

"And Babs," he replied, looking away from Tim in surprise. "Cassandra

only laughed, but they will be covering patrol, at least."

"Gotham's safe for the night," Dick chirped as he let go of Alfred. Jason did too, blushing a little at the show of affection.

"Well, lads, come now. I'll make you some hot chocolate," Alfred said, swiftly taking the wriggling Damian from Dick's arms. "Go up the stairs, and I will be with you in a moment. Remember to close the clock!"

"You got it Al!" Dick called. "Race ya upstairs, Jaybird!"

"Don't call me that!" Jason yelled after him as they ran up the stairs together. Bruce began tapping on the keys to the batcomputer again, completely forgetting that Tim was holding his cape when he tried to sweep it to the side.

"He looks a lot like you did at this age," Alfred remarked, bobbing a little to soothe Damian. "Except the nose."

"He grows into it," he replied flippantly, and Alfred said nothing, just gave Bruce a meaningful look. Instead of meeting his eyes, Bruce looked down at Tim. He was still looking pretty hesitant towards Alfred. Maybe Tim didn't recognize him. "Do you know who this is, Tim?"

"Alfred," Tim said silently, still clutching the cape tightly. Alfred gave Tim a soft look.

"Would you like to join the other boys up in the kitchen for some cocoa, Master Timothy?" Alfred said, and Damian gurgled happily, chanting 'cocoa, cocoa, cocoa!'.

"No thank you," Tim replied quietly, and Bruce was reminded of the expression 'hiding in mother's skirts'.

"Alright. You know where the kitchen is, if you change your mind, Master Timothy," Alfred replied, and when Bruce shot him a wide-eyed look, Alfred took no pity on him, and promptly took the stairs up, Damian's chants echoing through the cave and scaring some of the bats.

"I was just going to do some... Filing," he said slowly, and that was true, but he wanted to change out of the suit. Tim nodded. "You still want to stay here?" Tim nodded again, and Bruce mentally shrugged. He was a child; it'd only be a minute before he was bored and would

want to stroll back up to Alfred and the other children.

Tim trailed after him when he went and found another chair, and kept clutching the cape in his hand when Bruce helped him up into it. They settled down, and Bruce began skimming what he'd had on the villain that did this to them, when Tim kicked his feet in the air a little.

"We're not really this old, are we?" he said suddenly, and Bruce looked down at him, slightly surprised. Tim was only seven, his brain was barely even developed enough to draw these sort of conclusions. "You don't have any clothes our sizes and Alfred was surprised when he saw us."

"You're right, Tim. Bad people tried to hurt us by making you all younger. You're much easier to harm now," he replied, turning his chair and leaning forward a little so that he was looking at Tim.

"How much younger are we?" he nearly whispered, and now that Bruce tried to make eye contact with him, Tim's eyes flitted down to the Batsymbol on his chest.

"Nine years. You're really sixteen, Jason nineteen, and Dick twenty-two. Damian's eleven." Tim nodded.

"Bad people like the ones we fight made us small to hurt us?" he asked, reaching a thin finger out and tracing the symbol on Bruce's chest.

"Exactly. When you're older, you're much more threatening. Older you is Red Robin. But, you used to be Robin." Tim's eyes went even wider, however that was possible.

"*I* was Robin?" he whispered, an awed look on his face.

"You were," Bruce admitted, and he remembered those times, being trapped in grief from losing Jason, and Tim's insistence. *Batman needs a Robin*, he'd said, butting into Bruce's life and making it better. He was small and clever and sharp, and just what Bruce needed to get back on his feet. "You sure you don't want to go up and get some hot cocoa with the others?"

Tim shook his head, and finally dropped the piece of cape he'd taken a shine to. Bruce took the opportunity to stand up, and Tim quickly mimicked him, hopping off his chair too.

"Okay. We could probably find you something that you won't drown

in, down here."

In the lockers by the showers, Bruce managed to find one of Tim's Superboy t-shirts, which was just as big, if not bigger, than the other one, but Tim traced the S reverently and wouldn't take it off once it was on him, so Bruce let him be. Besides, he found some of Damian's sweatpants that Dick had tried to wash, which had lead to their shrinkage. He still had to roll the legs up quite a bit for them to fit Tim's small frame. His eleven-year-old was pretty sturdy in comparison to Tim.

Leaving Tim to root through his own locker, Bruce took a quick shower, and peeled out of the suit, putting on some sweatpants and a t-shirt. He could've sat in it, but he was pretty sure he wasn't going back out tonight, not with all the children running around here. Besides, the suit was stiff and unforgiving, which was great for sitting still for hours, watching, waiting, but now that he didn't have to, he decided not to.

Tim, however, seemed sad to see the cape go, and couldn't be coaxed to let go of his pantleg. Once Bruce sat back down, he decided to just put Tim in his lap for now. He could still write around him, and Tim seemed eager to just listen to Bruce's thought process.

"So it was magic that did this to us," Tim stated silently after only a few minutes, kicking his legs a little against the seat, a sweet, concentrated frown on his face.

"It was. Good job, Tim," Bruce praised, because that's where he'd gone wrong last time, wasn't it. Not giving them enough praise. Tim's head spun around so fast he might have snapped his neck at those words. His big, blue eyes were wider than saucers.

"Really?" he asked, and there was a little strength in it this time, like he couldn't believe an adult was praising him, and this was Tim before his Batman obsession, this was Tim when all he wanted was his parents' love and attention. Before he'd learnt that it didn't matter to his parents how quiet or how loud he was. They were never home anyway.

"Yes," Bruce said, swallowing a little thickly as a blush rose on Tim's cheeks. "You found out I was Batman just by watching me move. It was impressive." *However annoying*. Tim's blush deepened.

"How can we go back to normal?" he asked quickly, and Bruce was a little relieved that Tim wanted to stop talking about this as much as

he did.

After half an hour of reading, there was a ping, and a message from Stephanie popped up in the corner.

Heads up, Blue's in town.

Bruce sighed, but if Clark was flying in, he wouldn't be listening to him. He'd just have to wait until he got here to yell at him for entering Gotham without his permission.

They sat there for maybe another half hour, Tim's reading speedy for someone his age, when the entrance alarm beeped. Bruce swept his eyes over towards the screen, and exhaled tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Not what he needed right now.

"Who's that?" Tim asked curiously, as he tried to get a good look at the blue blob coming towards them, zooming through the cave systems into the actual cave.

"Superman," Bruce said tiredly, helping Tim hop off his lap before standing up. Tim quickly hid right behind his legs, grabbing a hold of the fabric just before Clark came out from the entrance to the surface, smiling brightly.

"Hi," he beamed, because that's what the huge dork did, he *beamed* all over the place, as if the sunrays stayed underneath his skin just so he could reflect them into all of Bruce's dark corners.

"Hi," Bruce replied in a monotone as Clark dropped down on the ground, still smiling. "Look, Clark, this isn't the time-"

"You're in really early. You're not hurt, are you?" Clark asked worriedly, and Bruce restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

"No. I'm fine, and I sure as hell didn't give you permission to enter Gotham tonight, now did I?" he said, and felt Tim move behind him. Just before he could stop him, he peeked out from behind his legs, and Bruce closed his eyes and sighed in resignation. Nothing was going quite right tonight.

Obviously, Clark had seen Tim, and his brightly blue eyes widened.

"Oh god. Is that..." Clark said, his jaw slack. Bruce crossed his arms over his chest, resigning himself to dealing with Clark's nosyness.

"Tim, want to say hi?" he asked coaxingly, looking down at his pantleg, where Tim was still hiding. Tim stayed silent.

"Is it just Tim or..."

"All the boys. Magic. Now, get out of Gotham."

"All of them?" Clark exclaimed. "Christ. All four? How old are they?" Bruce glared, and Clark rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on, Bruce. Be a little civil. You don't have to deal with all four of them on your own."

"I have-"

"-I know Alfred's here," Clark interrupted. "I know, but there are four of them, and two of you. And despite you being the world's greatest detective, you can't handle all of them at once. Especially not this young."

"Why wouldn't I be able to?" Bruce asked coldly, and Clark frowned, and then crouched down to Tim's level.

"Hi Tim," he said softly, smiling invitingly. "I'm Clark. Nice to meet you." He held out a big hand, and Tim stared at him for a few seconds before snaking out a hand and gently gripping two of Clark's fingers. "You saw that I can fly, right? Want to take a little ride?"

"Can I?" Tim asked breathily, and Clark chuckled.

"Of course, kiddo! C'mon," he said, and Tim appeared from behind Bruce's legs as Clark lay down horizontally in the air, to Tim's great amusement. Then, Tim was helped aboard Clark's washboard abs and zoomed around the cave like Clark was a flying carpet.

By the end of their little five minute tour, scaring the bats, Tim was laughing a giggly, red cheeked sort of laugh. When Clark set him down, Tim grabbed a hold of *his* cape, instead, smiling goofily up at Clark, who smiled right back.

Bruce wasn't jealous. Tim was a child, at that point in his development, he probably had a new favorite person once every hour.

"Tim is dating your clone, of course he's going to like you," Bruce muttered, but Clark just grinned.

"Hey, wanna sit on my shoulders?" he asked Tim, who nodded

vehemently, and was lifted onto Superman's shoulders. "Let's go upstairs, we'll ask Alfred to get us some hot chocolate, meet the other boys."

"Clark," Bruce said sharply, and Clark stopped on his way towards the stairs, hovering about half a foot off the ground, Tim delightedly clutching his hair. He blinked.

"Yeah?" Pointedly, Bruce looked down at the symbol on his chest, and Clark followed his gaze. "Oh. Right." He smiled sheepishly, and was just about to spin out of it when Bruce made a sharp noise.

"Tim," he reminded him, and Clark gave him another sweet, sheepish smile as Bruce bared his teeth.

"Sorry, Timmy, gonna have to put you down again, just for a quick second."

"Why?" Tim whined as Clark put him back down on the cave floor and took a little step back.

"We don't want your dad getting mad if I accidentally toss you off or make you puke when I spin at Mach 4," Clark laughed. Tim looked confused.

"That's not my dad. That's Broose." Tim looked up at Bruce as though Clark was a crazy person, and Bruce chuckled lowly at Clark's baffled look.

"You're right, chum," he agreed, making a 'spin' motion with his hand at Clark. "I'm Bruce. You follow Clark upstairs, and I'll be right with you. I just need to contact someone."

"To get us back to normal?" Tim asked quietly as Clark twirled into a flannel and jeans, thick-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, dulling the bright, bright blue of his eyes. "I wanna help."

"You can help by getting Clark out of my sight. Okay?" he said very seriously, and Tim nodded gravely back, grabbing Clark's hand and leading him up the stairs.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Diana couldn't stop laughing when he told her, all she did was wheeze into the comm, so he hung up on her, told J'onn, and told him to tell Zatanna to call him if she showed up to the Watchtower. Then he called Zatanna, and obviously, she didn't answer. He'd doubted she would. He left a voicemail, and spent at least another six minutes just flipping through casefiles, trying to avoid going upstairs.

After a while, however, he decided that he couldn't leave Alfred to deal with the children for much longer.

Clark's entrance was sort of a nice surprise, Bruce admitted to himself grudgingly as he walked up the stairs; if only because Dick would be starstruck. If he remembered correctly, Jason had been pretty mellow when he met Clark for the first time, but when he'd met Diana? The kid hadn't been able to complete a sentence, because he was so filled with awe.

Bruce could hear yelling as he got closer to the kitchen, and he considered turning back around, except he saw Damian's small, happy face in front of him, and heard Dick's laughter in his head, and goddammit. He was a better father than this.

He strode into the kitchen like a man preparing for battle, and oh, did Bruce get a battle.

Tim had somehow ended up on top of the fridge, looking terrified, Jason and Dick were swordfighting with *actual swords* on top of the kitchen island, and Damian was sitting on the counter, stuffing whole marshmallows into his mouth with a happy look on his face. There was cocoa powder everywhere, milk splattered over the fridge, cutlery spilled on the floor, and Alfred was nowhere to be seen.

Clark, however, was trying to reason with Dick and Jason.

"Hey, guys, come on, put the swords down," Clark pleaded hopelessly, and Bruce sighed to himself. Jason was grinning like a maniac as the swords clashed with the hissing of metal, and Bruce recognized that

spark in his eyes now. He hadn't noticed when Jason was younger, hadn't seen the anger, had been too busy being angry himself.

"Dick," he said sharply, and his eldest startled, turning his wide night-blue eyes on Bruce. The tip of his sword clanged against the stone surface of the kitchen island with shock.

"I was just showing Jase some tricks they taught me in the circus," Dick said quickly, defensively.

"Put the swords down. Are they from one of the upper floor sitting rooms?"

"Yeah," Jason said with a pout, shooting his chin forward. "What about it?"

"They're sharp and dangerous," Bruce said, stepping forward so that he was standing next to the kitchen island, staring up at the kids on the counter. He considered putting his hands on his hips but discarded the idea. Neither would respond well.

"So?" Jason said challengingly, and raised his sword again. Bruce realized a fraction of a second before Jason took his swing that this one wasn't as playful as the others had been. Dick's hand was only loosely holding onto his sword, still staring at Bruce, shamefaced and sheepish. He didn't see the swing coming.

Bruce's arm shot out just in time to catch the sword, but he had sort of forgotten that he wasn't wearing any armguards. The sword made a slick noise as it cut through his flesh, but Jason was small, untrained. The chop wasn't hard enough to cut to bone. Didn't mean it didn't hurt a little.

He sucked in his breath through his teeth, and Tim, Dick, and Clark each yelled something in shock. Jason's teal eyes were filled with fear, but he didn't pull the sword out, just standing there, staring.

"Oh my god, Bruce!" Clark yelled again as Dick dropped his sword with a loud clanging noise, and Alfred appeared from the door to the closest sitting room, his look becoming pinched as he saw the scene before him.

"Master Richard, Master Jason," he said firmly, and Dick slid off the kitchen island quickly as Alfred grabbed the sword out of Jason's hand gently. Jason, still looking scared and ready to bolt, slid down after his brother.

"It's fine, Jason. You didn't mean it," Bruce forced himself to grit out as Alfred cleanly got the sword out of his arm and pressed a dishtowel onto the wound, holding his arm high above his head.

"Mr. Kent, if you could please pull Master Damian out of the marshmallow bag and help Master Timothy down from the fridge," Alfred said calmly, but slightly steely, a chill in his voice. Guiltily, Clark picked up a now very unhappy Damian, and let Tim climb down on his shoulders. "I suggest moving everyone into the sitting room to your left whilst I deal with Master Bruce's arm."

"Right, yes," Clark agreed, and put a hand on Dick's shoulder, trying to nudge Jason with the same hand and getting swatted off, much like Bruce had been earlier.

Alfred shooed Bruce back in the direction of the cave, and he went willingly.

During the stitching, Alfred didn't say a word, but he kept giving Bruce this look. When he was done with the suturing, he pressed an antiseptic pad to the wound, and pursed his lips.

"That was very idiotic, Master Wayne," he said calmly, but being called Master Wayne was never good when it came to Alfred.

"Dick wasn't holding the sword properly. He'd have gotten slashed if I hadn't intervened," Bruce protested lowly. Alfred placed the bloody needle on the tray next to him, still with his pursed lips of disappointment.

"At most a scratch. And it would've taught them to stay away from the swords," Alfred said, sighing quietly when Bruce hopped off the medical bed, examining the medical tape keeping the pad on his arm. Alfred pulled his hand away from it without looking, putting away the tools. "Pure force of will and picking at it won't help it heal, Master Wayne."

Bruce didn't dignify that with an answer, instead grabbing his right armguard, putting it on. He hissed when he twisted his arm, and the armguard rubbed dangerously against the stitches. Immediately he set to work, adjusting the armguard so that he could move without it worrying the stitches.

He'd only been at work for maybe ten minutes when he heard small feet behind him. He stopped cutting the kevlar, and looked over his shoulder. No one there. He snorted as he looked around.

"Come on, Jason. I'm not mad. I promise," he said, and it was silent for a few moments, and then Jason peeked out from behind one of the stalagmites. He looked worried, but also like he was trying to hide it. Jason always managed to wear his bleeding heart on his sleeve. He'd gotten better at hiding it by the time Bruce took him in, but he was smaller now than he'd been then.

"Promise?" he asked again. Bruce nodded, and Jason gave him one last suspicious look before he stepped forward. He was now wearing gray sweatpants, and a bright red shirt that actually fit his slim frame. His socks had tiny rockets on them.

"Did Alfred find some clothes for you?" Bruce asked as he turned back to his work. Jason came over to the workbench, curiously peeking over Bruce's shoulder.

"No, Clark went shopping," he said distantly. "'Cause he's Superman. And the demo-I mean Damian, wanted some toys."

"Anything good?" Bruce asked, ignoring Jason calling Damian 'demon'. They were at each other's throats all the time as it was, and the only thing stopping them from being that now was that Damian wasn't able to tounge lash him. At least not in English. He doubted Jason's Farsi had followed him through the change though.

"No. Nothing fun."

"We'll get something more fun later. Nerf guns, bouncy castle, whatever you want," Bruce replied, already figuring out how to use an off-shore account, fake names, getting all of it transferred as soon as possible and as quietly as possible. He'd have to cancel all of Tim's W.E. business things, call Dick in sick to work, hope that Jason didn't have a big bust planned, and tell Damian's tutors that they could take a week or two off.

Hopefully, Zatanna could reverse the whole thing before that, but she was always off world, always going somewhere else, and she didn't have the good sense to check her comms enough. If they were lucky, they'd only have to deal with this for maybe two weeks before she finally came up for air.

"Really?" Jason asked, his jaw slack with awe as he stared at Bruce. The white streak in Jason's hair wasn't even there yet. Bruce had a strange urge to ruffle the dark mop of hair.

"Yeah," he replied easily as he put the finishing touches on the

armguard. Then, after a moment: "I like your socks."

"They're pretty cool, right?" Jason agreed happily, wiggling his toes with his hands in his pockets, and Bruce was painfully reminded that this Jason was young, yes, but he was only nine years younger than he was supposed to be.

He was still practically a kid, either way.

"Very," Bruce agreed seriously as he put the glove down and stood up. "It's getting late. We should head off to bed."

"What? It's barely ass-kicking-crime time," Jason said incredulously as Bruce nudged him towards the stairs. This time, he wasn't batted off.

"We could all use a little more sleep," Bruce replied, repeating Alfred's weary words. Jason rolled his eyes.

"Crime doesn't sleep!" he protested as Bruce closed the clock behind them.

"Crime's bad. Sleep is good," Bruce said very seriously, and was rewarded with a crooked, happy grin from Jason. And oh, oh that hurt. That happy grin, without the manic glint, without the sneered words. Just young Jason, happy to be with him.

Before Bruce knew what he was doing, he had wrapped an arm around Jason's shoulders and pulled him into his side. Jason wrapped an arm around Bruce's waist, like this was something they did everyday and not like the last hug Bruce had ever gotten from him was at least five years ago.

"You have really boring socks," Jason pointed out helpfully as they walked to the sitting room where everyone else was. "Clark should get you better ones."

"Does Clark have good taste in socks?" Bruce asked, mostly to keep the easy conversation going. Children were amusing like that, sometimes.

"Yeah he does. He got Dickie a pair with sharks on them, and Tim got a pair with flowers. He loved them," he said, like Tim was a weirdo. "Damian's socks have your symbol on them."

Bruce scoffed, and Jason grinned toothily up at him when Bruce entered the sitting room. Tim was asleep in the armchair, curled up like a little cat, and Clark was on the couch, Dick smiling up at him

adoringly as Damian, making a sweet frowning face, sat in Clark's lap like he was being imprisoned.

"Hot chocolate," Alfred announced as he came in through the doorway leading to the kitchen with a tray in hand. Dick thanked him immediately, and Jason stole a mug and sat down on the other side of Clark, not saying anything.

"Jason," Dick whispered reproachfully, and he gave Dick a weird look.

"What?" he asked.

"Manners," Clark reminded him, and Jason blanched.

"Thanks Alfie," he hurried to say, looking up at Alfred like he was genuinely sorry. Alfred offered him a small smile, and Jason sank into the couch with a blush rising on his cheeks.

Bruce stared at Tim in the armchair, and looked to Alfred for guidance. When Alfred raised an eyebrow at him, Bruce considered letting Tim sleep there, but he should get to a real bed, and it was pretty late.

He crouched down in front of Tim's chair, and tried to figure out how to move Tim without waking him up. Just then, a blue eye cracked open, and Tim rubbed his cheek against the old fabric of the chair.

"Broose?" he asked, his voice so quiet Bruce barely had any idea where the cocky kid who'd elbowed his way into his life was.

"Yeah, Tim," he said quietly. "C'mon, I'll take you up to bed."

"No!" Tim said, surprisingly loud, and blinked both eyes open, righting himself in the chair. "I want to stay." He raised an eyebrow at Alfred, who pursed his lips for a moment, but then seemed to shrug it off. Tim was practically falling asleep as it was. He'd be unconscious soon enough.

Bruce mentally shrugged, and nodded, picking Tim up and settling down in the chair, with Tim in his lap. Warmth and body contact was a good way of making Tim fall asleep sooner. Tim immediately grabbed part of his t-shirt and rested his head against Bruce's lower arm on the armrest.

The TV was on, playing some bright cartoons, and all four children were quickly absorbed in it, even though Damian's head kept drooping

back against Clark's stomach and then snapping back up again. Dick was now leaning his head against Clark's shoulder, and Jason's blinking was getting very slow.

Everything was going fine, until Damian began wailing. Clark and Bruce exchanged slightly panicked looks, and Alfred, who'd been sitting in the other cushy chair, shook his head, closed his book, and stood up.

"He's just hungry," the butler soothed, taking Damian out of Clark's arms, and disappearing into the kitchen. Bruce looked at the clock on the wall. Nearly one am.

"I think this is a good time to get everyone to bed," he announced, and Dick yawned so big his jaw cracked. Jason rubbed the palm of his hand into his eye tiredly. Tim was snoring lightly into the crook of Bruce's arm.

"Good plan," Clark agreed, and prodded the two boys next to him standing as Bruce stood up, holding Tim.

Tim remained asleep during the whole process of getting everyone in bed, but it was pretty easy to brush his teeth anyways, and then put him back in the Superboy shirt he'd worn earlier. His socks did indeed have flowers on them, purple flowers on a pastel green background. Bruce stood in Tim's room for a few minutes in silence, watching the covers stretched over the Tim-shaped lump' gently rise and fall.

Dick and Jason had tucked into their own rooms without much prompting. Jason's room wasn't dusty, Alfred wouldn't let that happen, but Bruce had been reluctant to let him go in. Whenever he stayed over, he always slept in a guest bedroom, but this Jason remembered his own room, and wanted to stay there. Bruce had Clark go through it for weapons before Jason hopped into bed and fell asleep.

"So," Clark said silently when Bruce came out of Tim's room, standing awkwardly and fiddling with his glasses. Bruce crossed his arms over his chest, but Clark could tell that it wasn't to show he was angry. Maybe seeing all of his kids so young was making him feel a little vulnerable. "You sure you don't need help with them?"

"They like you," Bruce admitted. "I'm sure they won't like you leaving. Especially not Dick."

"Yeah, I remember when I met him the first time," Clark said, a slow smile spreading on his face. To Bruce's mild surprise, he could feel his

pulse elevate slightly. That was unlike him. Maybe he was coming down with a cold. God knows he'd sat outside in the rain enough lately. "He was like that then, too. It was cute. Still sort of is."

"It's a little odd."

"Really? This sort of feels like it should be a regular Tuesday for you," Clark remarked. "The whole age regression thing."

"That's not what I meant."

"What's odd then?" Clark asked. Bruce made a face like he was tasting what he was about to say, rolling it around in his mouth like a fine wine.

"Jason is nice to me," he said slowly. "Dick looks up to me. Tim... He's so quiet."

"Dick still looks up to you," Clark hurried to soothe, grabbing Bruce's bicep and squeezing it gently. Bruce chuckled lowly, but didn't turn away from the contact.

"No, he doesn't. The only one of them who still looks up to me a little might be Damian, and that's only because Talia brainwashed him into thinking of me as a sort of deity."

"Tim being quiet isn't bad, necessarily," Clark went on, still holding onto Bruce's bicep. "He got louder, when he came to you, right? He found his voice. Jason... Well, Jason's civil with you now, at least," he finished lamely. Bruce snorted, and Clark cracked a grin. "You can't win 'em all."

"No, but I'd like to win at least one," Bruce said silently. Clark squeezed again.

"They're all great kids," he said. "Some a little damaged, but they all keep getting back up when they fall down. They all do good in the world. I'd call that a win."

Bruce made a thoughtful face, but didn't say anything.

"I hope you know the only reason I haven't kicked you out on your ass into the rain is because the kids would give me hell about it," he said, trailing down the hall towards his own bedroom.

"Does that mean I can stay the night? I mean-" he said quickly when

Bruce shot him a look over his shoulder. "If it's not..."

"Alfred already made up the guest room next to mine for you," Bruce said with a slight smile. "But don't think I'm done with you. You still don't have anything close to permission to just pop in anytime you want."

"Of course not," Clark nodded very mock seriously, and Bruce sighed.

"Is it so hard to try acting like an adult?" he asked incredulously. Clark grinned sheepishly.

"You just bring it out in me sometimes."

"Oh please. Don't use me as an excuse for your childish behavior."

"Who said I was excusing myself? You could use a little childish sometimes," Clark remarked. Bruce allowed himself a smile, and Clark smiled back, feeling warm on the inside just looking at his friend. "Goodnight Bruce."

"Goodnight Clark," Bruce replied silently, and walked into his own room, shutting the door.

It was still pretty early for him, so he looked over some WE numbers on his tablet as well as some blueprints for a new armor for Dick, but that was probably off the table for now. He considered getting himself a drink, but he was a little too tired.

He rubbed the back of his neck tiredly, and opened a separate window on the screen to find toys to amuse his kids. Bruce was just considering getting one of those small electric cars for Tim when someone knocked on his door. From the sturdy, quick raps, it was probably Alfred.

"Come in, Alfred," he said loud enough to be heard through the solid door, and his trusty butler opened the door, sticking his head in.

"Still up, Master Bruce?" he asked mildly.

"Not a lot to tire me out. Thought I'd wait for the girls to report before going to bed." Alfred was still just sticking his head in. "What's the matter?"

Finally, he fully appeared, and Bruce noticed that Damian, who was probably now fed, was asleep with his head resting against Alfred's

old, sturdy shoulder. He had a diaper bag with colorful dinosaurs tossed over his other shoulder, and Bruce had to wonder where the hell Clark had gotten all of this stuff.

"Well, Master Bruce, we don't have a nursery in the manor any longer," Alfred said pointedly. "I'm afraid Master Damian doesn't have anywhere to rest. He's much too young to be left alone in his old room, with the various weapons he leaves around there."

Bruce stared at his butler, who resolutely stared back. Damian made mumbling, sleepy noises from the old man's arms.

"Give him here," Bruce sighed in defeat, and Alfred's mouth turned up just a fraction before it was gone, and he handed Damian over to his father.

"Good lad, Master Bruce. Sleep well," Alfred said, dropping the brand-new-looking diaper bag by the door before exiting the room. Bruce gently bounced on the balls of his feet to soothe Damian, readjusting him so that he was taking up Bruce's entire lower part of his one arm instead, walking into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

When he was done with that, he set Damian down in the middle of the big bed, and put on a pair of pj-pants. Rooting through the diaper bag, he found a small toothbrush, and brushed Damian's teeth. It was also surprisingly easy. Damian was entirely conked out, and even made a small snoring noise when Bruce started brushing his own teeth.

Besides his Batman socks, Damian was wearing sweatpants and a shirt that happily declared 'my daddy's a superhero!'. Clark must've really let himself go when he'd seen that shirt. He got rid of the socks and the sweatpants, and settled Damian under the covers next to him, bringing his tablet with him.

At around 2:30 AM, his tablet vibrated as Cass sent in a report and Babs gave him a quick rundown of the night. Steph was a procrastinator, Babs had worked with him for too long to care about his filing system, and Cass only wrote short sentences, like 'Fabioni arrested. 8 goons too. New drug on streets. BG has info."

After skimming Babs' analysis of the drug, he decided to tuck in, and slid down next to Damian. His small son was wrinkling his nose in his sleep, his little hands clenched into fists. When he settled himself on his side, looking over at baby Damian, the little boy whimpered, and rolled in his sleep, curling up with his back against his father's chest.

Frowning, Bruce wrapped an arm around the small body, and shushed him gently.

"**You're safe, Dami,**" he whispered in Farsi, and Damian grabbed his arm, his little nails digging into his flesh. What was it about his kids and his arms today? Luckily, it wasn't the arm Jason had slashed, but still. Damian's little nails were surprisingly sharp. "**Don't worry, little prince. You're safe with me, Damian.**"

After a little more whimpering, Damian settled down, breathing steadily, and Bruce closed his eyes and let himself fall asleep too.

Dick woke up in the middle of the night, sweaty and breathing hard. The rain outside had picked up into a thunderstorm, fat drops rapping against the old windows angrily. Dick licked his lips, staring into his room as lightning lit up the room. He jumped as the thunder followed quickly, making his bed shake.

Still half-asleep, he jumped out of bed, grabbed his pillow, and walked across the hall. He knocked on Bruce's door quickly, and opened it a crack.

Bruce's head lifted from the bed, and Dick walked in without giving it a second thought.

"Can I sleep here with you?" he whispered, and Bruce was quiet for a few seconds before his head lowered back to his pillow.

"Okay," he replied, his voice a tired rumble, and that tired rumble felt safe, and warm, and inviting. Dick crawled onto the bed, fully prepared to plaster himself to Bruce's side, when Bruce held a hand up. "Damian's right here. Don't disturb him."

Dick decided that the other side of Bruce was fine too, and put his pillow down next to his guardian. Gripping Bruce's upper torso and tugging his arm over his shoulders led to Bruce lying down on his back, an amused huff escaping his lungs. When Dick burrowed his face into Bruce's ribs, Bruce tried a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Thunderstorms, huh? I'd forgotten that," he said into the darkness. Dick burrowed into the covers, and nodded a little. Bruce began to gently pet his hair, and Dick closed his eyes.

"Thunder makes me think about ropes snapping," Dick mumbled, and

began falling back asleep now that he felt safer. Bruce nodded to himself in the darkness.

It took maybe fifteen minutes before the door creaked again, and Bruce hadn't quite fallen back asleep yet, so he lifted his head, and was reminded that practically all of his children had an odd fear of thunderstorms. Dick because it reminded him of ropes snapping, Jason because he'd lived on the streets during enough thunderstorms to know to fear them, and Tim because he didn't like the suddenness of it all, or the rumble of the thunder.

This time, when Bruce looked to the doorway, Tim was standing there, shaking a little, and without him having to ask, Bruce patted the bed gently, murmuring a 'c'mon'.

Tim had to climb to get up on the bed, because it was so high, and his scrawny little knees dug into Bruce's stomach, making him grunt. Then Tim flopped down on top of him, tucking his head over by Bruce's right shoulder. Dick's hand got squished between their two stomachs', and he grumbled and instead put it down on Tim's back. Tim fell back into slumber without saying a single word.

The last to join them was Jason, who was obviously very reluctant. He came at least half an hour later, when the thunder was making the windows rattle, and the lightning kept striking outside.

He stood in the doorway, completely silent, for almost two minutes. Bruce just waited patiently, until Jason trailed further into the room, staring at his brothers. That seemed to comfort him a little, too. That he wasn't alone in his fear. Bruce kept his breathing slow and even, making it look like he was asleep so that Jason could unguardedly curl up underneath the covers on the other side of Damian. Bruce sighed and shifted his weight, reaching his hand out to stroke Jason's soft, dark hair.

Jason tensed, but Bruce's breathing was still slow and even, like he was truly asleep. It took a while, but soon enough, Jason was asleep too, and Bruce let himself relax, five pairs of slow breaths filling the room.

Chapter End Notes

Come yell at me at tumblr @hots-of-love !
I hope you enjoyed the chapter! < 3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Christ," Bruce muttered to himself as he got Damian's foot jammed in his face. Tim had slid down during the night and was now securely spooned between Bruce's side and Dick. Jason was halfway off the bed, one foot on Bruce's thigh like a springboard.

At least Alfred had found it funny when he came in at around eight AM to check on them. Damian had been lifted off the bed silently and carefully, fed, changed, and then tucked right back in. Alfred had taken several pictures, and was probably going to fill some picture frames that would mysteriously appear in Bruce's study or the batcave.

There was a knock on the door, not Alfred's crisp knock but a slightly uncertain one, and Bruce gave a grunt of assent. Clark cracked the door open, and Bruce glowered at him when his jaw dropped a little. Then his lips spread into a wide grin.

"Well," Clark began, but Bruce's intense glare stopped him in his tracks.

At that moment, Dick rolled over onto his back and stretched loudly, and Jason managed to drop off the bed with a thud. The thud awoke Tim, who crawled over Bruce's stomach, dodging Damian's flailing arms, to get to the edge of the bed and giggle at Jason.

"Are you okay, Jase?" Bruce asked as Dick braced himself against the mattress and went into a bridge, flipping himself up in a wobbly handstand. He recieved angry mumbles from Jason, but Tim probably wouldn't be laughing at his brother if he'd brained himself, so Bruce assumed he was fine.

Dick's legs fell and Bruce caught them, tipping him over in a safer direction that wasn't at his own head, and grabbed Damian, stopping the small child from crawling off the edge of the bed.

"Need a hand?" Clark asked with a warm grin, and he hadn't bothered with the glasses, Bruce noticed distantly.

"Clark!" Dick cheered happily, and did a flip, nearly squishing Tim in the process, but Clark hurried to catch him. Dick climbed him like he was a jungle gym, crawling up to ride piggyback, and Bruce rolled out of bed, with Damian still in his arms.

"**Down**!" Damian yelled in Farsi, and Bruce gave him a skeptical look, but set his small son down on the carpet floor. Damian wobbled for but a moment, and then took off out of the room.

"Breakfast, c'mon," Bruce hurried to say, helping Jason up and Tim getting between his legs like a happy dog. Instead of tripping, Bruce just picked him up on his hip, and nudged Jason in front of him as Dick and Clark happily chatted.

Damian hadn't made it far down the hallway. He was sitting down outside his own door, petting a very happy but confused Titus. The big black dog dwarfed Damian as an eleven-year-old, and as a two-year-old, the size difference was even more laughable.

Damian's happy squeals were pretty cute though.

"Tius!" Damian gurgled happily, petting the huge black dog, and Titus' tail wagged happily in return for the affection.

"Well, that's reassuring," Clark said, sounding sort of relieved.

"Titus is a smart dog," Bruce said, smirking down at the great dane. Titus snuffled proudly, and butted Damian in the face with his damp nose. "I'm still trying to find patterns in what they remember. So far, I've determined things and people that they have strong emotional connections with."

"Like our rooms and Alfie," Dick agreed, smiling at Bruce from where he was still riding piggyback on Clark.

"Exactly," Bruce agreed. "Same fears as they had at their respective ages, too. **Come on, Damian**."

"No!" Damian said in English, pouting furiously.

"**Titus can come with us. We need to eat**," Bruce reminded him, and Damian kept pouting, crossing his arms petulantly. "Oh Christ," he muttered, and settled Tim down on the floor, scooping Damian up, much to the toddler's chagrin. He began screaming his head off, and Bruce hugged him with grim determination, before Dick slipped to the floor, and reached his hands out for the tantrum-throwing Damian.

"I got him, B," Dick said reassuringly, and Bruce slipped the tiny child into Dick's arms. "Hey, little D. I'm Dick. Can you say Dick?"

He bobbed a little on the spot, and whistled for Titus to follow him as he walked towards the stairs. Tim made a little 'up' noise, and was again lifted into Bruce's arms. Jason took Dick's place riding piggyback on Clark, and Damian's cries went almost completely silent, only the occasional grumble leaving the toddler.

In the kitchen, Alfred was arranging breakfast, fruit, waffles, cereal and toast lined up on the dining room table. The butler himself was standing at the stovetop, making scrambled eggs.

"Good morning, Sirs," he said, casting them a glance over his shoulder. "Please, take your seats in the dining room. How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you," Clark replied immediately, ever the grateful guest. Dick put Damian down in the suspiciously new-looking high chair as everyone took their usual seats at the dining table. Clark ended up furthest away from Bruce, but he didn't mind Tim's company, so he was fine.

"Bruce's bed is too small," Dick said as he grabbed a bowl and filled it with cereal.

"It's a king-size. You all just clump together around me. That's what makes it feel small," Bruce argued as Alfred served him his tea and placed the paper in front of him. Jason kicked his feet under the table, and managed to make the whole table rattle. He grinned.

"Whoops."

"Sit up in your chair, Jason," Bruce said without any real reprimand in his tone, Jason slumped more.

"Ass," he muttered, crossing his arms.

"Assss," Damian repeated cheerfully, and Jason immediately held his hands up at Bruce's withering glare.

"I didn't do it!" he exclaimed, stole a waffle, and took off out of the room. Bruce sighed.

"Please tell me I have a meeting today?" he pleaded, and Alfred smiled at him, like he was being a silly goose.

"Why, you've traveled to Aspen, Master Bruce. A family vacation to relax after a few stressful weeks at the company. It's been taxing and the family needs to settle for a while," Alfred told him and set down a mug of tea in front of him.

"Shit," Bruce groaned, burying his head in his hands.

"Shiiih," Damian repeated with a gleeful vengeance, and Bruce looked up just as Alfred settled a bowl of mashed raspberry and what looked like banana beside him.

"I would advise you get him something better to do, Sir," Alfred said, handing Bruce a spoon. Bruce grumbled, but took the spoon and scooped up some goo and held it out for Damian. When Damian gave it a conspiratorious sniff, Bruce shifted his attention to his other kids.

"Jason! Get back here! I'm not mad!" he called, and after a minute, Jason peeked into the dining room suspiciously. "Sit down. We don't eat breakfast running around." Jason squinted at him for a moment, and then sat down. Damian took the banana's and raspberry into his mouth, and tried to grab for the spoon. "Good."

"Don't you have to work today, Mister Kent?" Alfred remarked mildly as he poured Dick a glass of orange juice. Clark blinked.

"Shoot!" he exclaimed, disappearing in a blur, much to the amusement of the children.

"Shoo'!" Damian yelled, and launched a glob of berry mush onto the dining table.

"**Don't do that Damian**," Bruce chided in Farsi.

"**Cla' said shoot!**" Damian argued sensibly. "**That means you shoot**."

"**He meant it like a bad word, not an action**," Bruce relayed, scooping up some more goo to give to his son. Damian pouted.

"**I can do myself!**" Damian stated haughtily. Bruce raised an eyebrow.

"**If you say so**," he said, handing Damian his spoon. Damian procceded to smear himself in goo, getting at least two thirds actually into his mouth as Bruce picked up the Gotham Gazette from the table.

"Master Bruce," Alfred said, and his tone of voice said he disapproved. Bruce looked over at Damian again.

"**Need help getting the food into your mouth, Dami?**" Damian turned his nose into the air.

"No!" he nearly yelled in English. Bruce gave Alfred a 'see?' look, but the butler looked unimpressed, disappearing back into the kitchen

"Want a piece of waffle, Little D?" Dick asked with a grin, and Damian opened his mouth without hesitation when Dick gave him a small piece of the food. He made little 'nom nom' noises when he chewed, which was sort of adorable. Bruce hid his smile behind the paper as Clark reappeared in the dining room, now dressed in classic Clark Kent, bumbling reporter, getup. He shoved the glasses up on the bridge of his nose and shoved a waffle in his mouth, ready to take off again when Alfred appeared with a thermos full of warm coffee.

"Oh, um- thank you," Clark said, taking it out of Alfred's hands. "You're a life-saver. I'll return it as soon as I can."

"Later today will be fine. You are returning for dinner, aren't you, Mister Kent?" Alfred asked, quirking a greying eyebrow at the reporter.

Clark gaped like a fish for a few seconds, and then a slight blush set in on his cheeks.

"Um. If Bruce is okay with it, yeah, I'd love that." It wasn't like he had a more tempting dinner waiting for him at home. Living alone wasn't doing wonders for his health, as his ma kept tutting at him whenever he visited the farm.

"Yeah, Broose, can't Clark come back for dinner?" Tim asked, still so very quietly, and quickly Jason and Dick joined in in saying please. Damian said 'pees', which was sort of the same thing anyway, and Bruce felt his shoulders raise a little defensively against the onslaught of his happy, pleading children.

"Fine," he stated, like it was causing him great pain, and the table erupted in cheers. Alfred hid a smile as he turned away from Clark to serve Bruce a glass of orange juice as well ("If you're going to insist on staying out of sunlight, you're bloody well going to drink some Vitamin C, sir").

"I better go, guys," Clark said, looking at his watch again. "I'll see you."

"Bye Clark!" Dick said cheerfully.

"Yeah, bye," Jason said, smiling at Clark as he snagged Clark's wallet without the other man noticing.

"Jason, give him his wallet back," Bruce said before Clark left, and the brightly blue eyes blinked in surprise as the reporter patted himself down. Jason pouted.

"You're no fun, B," he accused, holding out Clark's wallet.

"Thanks?" Clark said, questioningly, and Bruce looked up from his paper and met Clark's eye.

"Work?" he reminded him, and Clark blinked, staring into Bruce's blue eyes a little too long.

"Right! Yes, you're right, I'm going," Clark said, finally tearing himself away and flying out of the mansion at super-speed.

Clark practically skidded into the Daily Planet a minute before the morning briefing, but he did manage to make it on time. Lois side-eyed him, but didn't say anything until they were out of the meeting. Clark was already working on a puff piece he'd be done with by lunch, and Lois had just finished her own article last night.

He had just seated himself in his cubicle when Lois sauntered over, bored with nothing to do.

"Hey Smallville. Anything newsworthy happening over here? Or, maybe gossip-worthy?" she asked distantly as she dropped down on his desk, and Clark choked on the gulp of coffee he was just trying to swallow. Lois' eyebrow rose. "Okay, that was more of a reply than anything. What sort of scandal have you uncovered?"

"Nothing," Clark coughed, taking another sip.

"Sometimes it amazes me that you've managed to keep your secret from so many people," Lois said, that glint in her eye like when she was chasing a lead. She patted his back to help clear up his cough, even though it was sort of useless. "What's up?"

"Nothing," he repeated. "I promise."

"No trouble in the other world?" she asked pointedly, crossing her ankles.

"No, no. Nothing like that. You're like a dog with a bone," he accused, and Lois shrugged.

"It's what you love about me. How's your crush? Still festering in the dark?" Sometimes Clark really regretted telling Lois about his feelings. "Oh. Yeah, it's that."

"Lois!" Clark practically pleaded, feeling blood rush to his cheeks as he thought about how Bruce had been all morning: sleepy, hair fluffy, being sweet with his kids. God, how was he supposed to resist that man when he smirked at him, all shirtless and serious? It seriously wasn't possible.

"I don't get it why you don't just try to talk to him," she complained, looking to the heavens. "You'd be cute together. Not to mention, I'm pretty sure Cat said his dick is as thick as a Coke can."

"Jesus, Lois!" Clark half-shouted, nearly choking on his own tongue. That was something he *really* didn't need to think about right now. However, his curiousity overtook him. "How would she know, anyway?"

"She's talked to many-a-Bruce Wayne girls, believe me. I'm sure you two could make it work. You just need to find some of that super-courage and get down to it," Lois said encouragingly, smiling at him.

"Now's not a good time."

"How come?" Clark hesitated, looked around, and listened to make sure no one was paying attention to them before leaning a little closer.

"His kids got de-aged. The oldest is 13 all of a sudden, the youngest 2. They're being a bit of a handful, we could barely get them to bed last night. This is definitely not the best time."

"*We* could barely get them to bed? Oh, Smallville, you're so smitten it's crazy," Lois smiled, shaking her head ruefully.

"You're staying with them?"

"Well, I mean-I-It was just last night. I'm going to dinner tonight, but that's it," Clark protested, feeling too big for his chair and his cubicle and the space nearby. Suddenly he really wanted to be out in the sun.

"Uh-huh," Lois said, hopping off his desk without trouble, even in heels and a pencil-skirt, and strolling over to her own desk across the

walkway. "We on for lunch?"

"Yeah," Clark agreed, and tried to focus on his puff piece and not the sound of Bruce's slow, crawling heartbeat over in Gotham.

Alfred's threat of Aspen had been real, and there Bruce sat, in the library, watching as the boys used the high shelves and their proximity for fun. He was a little worried, but he'd also seen all three of them have the same reflexes as he'd trained them to have, so he wasn't *all* that worried.

Currently he believed they were playing pirates, as Jason kept making an 'arrgh' sound, and Dick jumped from bookshelf to bookshelf yelling about ripping the sails. Even the usually silent Tim had been charmed by the game, and was hooting about landlubbers.

Damian was on the floor in front of him, playing with some raggedy toys but entirely uninterested. His two-year-old was watching the other children play like a hawk watching it's prey. He'd already tried to make a break for it three times, so Bruce had moved to the floor, trapping Damian within gripping range. He wasn't so stupid as to let his toddler try to climb the shelves, after all.

"The mighty captain Blue Bird calls for ye to lower a gangplank!" Dick yelled from one of the bookshelves, his sweatpants rolled up over his ankles and without socks on. Tim was standing behind Dick, giggling and happy.

"The cooler captain Redbeard tells ye to fuck off!" Jason yelled back from the bookshelf across from Dick and Tim's.

"Language," Bruce called from the floor, clicking around on the computer, trying to find a good website for toys and clothes.

"It just ain't as fun if I can't cuss!" Jason whined.

"Learn to be creative with it," Tim suggested. "Then you can cuss without Bruce knowing you're cussing."

"What's the point then?" Jason questioned.

"Come on down and we'll look around for some toys," Bruce said before Tim could reply, feeling surprisingly calm about the whole thing. He's about to spend a fortune on things he's not gonna need in

two weeks. He should be more upset. Mostly he just likes the grins on their faces.

Jason and Dick whooped and climbed down the bookshelves like monkeys, with Tim not far behind. Damian sensed that something was going on, and shot his father a suspicious look.

Bruce settled in the couch in front of the fireplace, with Damian in his lap, Jason on his left, Tim on his right, and Dick hanging over the back of the couch, breathing beside his ear, a soft, soothing sound.

"So, how many things do we get to pick?" Jason asked, blue eyes wide.

"Well, how many things do you want, Jason?" Bruce asked. Jason blinked.

"How'm I s'posed to know?"

"It sounded like you had a number in mind, is all. Pick what you want," Bruce said.

"I wanna go first," Dick said, nearly snatching the computer out of Bruce's hands, except Jason's hands were there, and then Damian's, and Tim rolled in under the couch for protection. Bruce took a deep, steadying breath, and closed his eyes, envisioning a world where this wasn't the way things usually went.

"Jason! Dick!" Bruce barked, and both boys froze, looking at him with huge eyes. "Calm down. I hold the computer and you *point* at what you want. Tim, you're safe, no need to hide under there. Dick, please sit down on the couch. **Don't chew on that, Damian.**" Bruce shifted, grabbed Dick underneath the arms and lifted him down next to Jason, much to Dick's enjoyment, and took the edge of the computer out of Damian's mouth.

After a poke under the couch with his foot revealed that Tim was decidedly *not* coming out yet, and was cuddling with Titus underneath the couch instead of dealing with the rest of his brothers, he scrolled through the website, letting the kids pick what they wanted. He'd just have to do the same with Tim later.

When they'd picked enough toys to fill the whole mansion, Bruce moved on to clothing. This was when Tim finally deemed the couch safe enough to return to. Some superhero t-shirts, a bunch of sweatpants and socks, and a leotard for Dick, and when Damian whined about it, a matching one for him.

The home screen for the website popped up, and there was a picture of a white dress with flowers all over. Tim's hand made an abortive grabbing motion, and immediately, a blush tinted his cheeks.

Bruce silenced his other chattering children with a look and turned to Tim.

"Do you like the dress, Tim?" Bruce asked him seriously. Tim nodded silently. "Then we'll get it for you."

"But he's a boy?" Dick inquired, sounding more amused than disgusted.

"So?" Bruce asked calmly. He dressed up in a suit made to look like a bat, for godsake. If Tim wanted a dress with purple flowers on it, who the hell was Bruce to impose gender norms on him? Dick didn't seem to have a good response to that, so Bruce turned his attention back to the computer.

"What color tights?"

"White," Tim said without hesitation. "And red. And green."

"You got it," Bruce said, clicking all the options. "What next?"

Tim pouted a little, like he was thinking, and then took a silent, shaky breath.

"Yoga pants?" he questioned.

"Ooh, I want a pair, too!" Dick exclaimed, and Jason crossed his arms.

"Well if they're getting them, I want a pair!"

"Of course," Bruce replied sensibly and added the items to the cart. "Are you done now?"

"I think so," Dick said, twisting his mouth to one side as he thought.

"Well, if you think of anything else, we'll deal with it. You can go back to the pirate game now."

"We're not pirates, we're villains!" Jason said before dashing up the bookcase again, Dick hot on his heels and Tim trailing after. That was a little concerning, really. As long as they didn't start sparring on top of the bookcases, it'd probably be fine.

Once the other kids were sufficiently occupied, he turned to his youngest.

"**What do you want, little prince?**" Bruce murmured in Farsi to Damian, who pouted as he stared at the selection of toys.

"That," he said, his little grin devious as he pointed to a little foam sword. Bruce sighed. Of course. He added six swords to the cart, just in case Cass and Steph would find it amusing.

There was a knock on the library door, and Bruce looked up just as it opened, and, lo and behold, Cassandra was standing outside. She was wearing a pair of flannel pajamapants, and a tank top, and her short, dark hair was put up in a tiny tiny ponytail at the nape of her neck.

"Aren't you cold?" Bruce offered, and Cass shrugged, coming into the room and sitting down next to him and Damian on the couch. Damian was suddenly starry-eyed and entirely still and silent in Bruce's lap.

"Hello Damian," Cassandra said softly, and stroked a finger down Damian's soft, round cheek. Damian just stared, looking gobsmacked and admiring. Bruce hid his smile by looking down, and Damian stretched his hands out towards Cass.

"He wants you to pick him up," Bruce relayed when Cass gave him a surprised look. As good as Cass was at reading body-language, babies were new and odd. They didn't really know what they were communicating. Neither did she, apparently. It was an opportunity to observe her, Bruce noticed. Cass shook her head a little, much to Damian's despair.

"Hi Cass!" Dick called from the top of a bookshelf, and Tim waved as Jason grinned devilishly. She waved back.

"How was patrol?" Bruce asked as Damian shifted restlessly, trying to get to Cass.

"Fine," she replied, pulling her feet up under herself. Talking was still hard, and she really preferred not having to, but Bruce was patiently trying to teach her to express herself both verbally and physically. "Kicked ass."

"Assss," Damian said, and Cass' smiled at him.

"Don't encourage him. Injuries?" he asked, and Cassandra smiled wider at Damian. Bruce internally sighed, but let it slide. He noticed that he

tended to be more short-spoken with Cass, reacting to her own speech pattern and adapting. She probably noticed too, but didn't say anything about it.

"Nothing serious," she replied.

"Any plans today?"

"Steph and I. Movies," she replied, rubbing an eye. Bruce laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed, and she smiled at him gently. "Going soon."

"Alright. Will you be home for dinner? Stephanie can come," he said. She shook her head.

"Take-out."

"Okay. As long as you're eating," he said, pinning her with a look. Cassandra laughed softly, and graced his forehead with a light kiss before getting up again, waving at the boys before walking out.

Damian whined, stretching after her, and Bruce understood his son. He brushed Damian's wispy hair back from his forehead and reeled him back in.

"**Cass doesn't want to play with you, Damian. You'll have to just wave to her,**" he said, and Damian made an annoyed, confused face, because why wouldn't someone want to play with him? But then he just waved at Cassandra, who waved back before disappearing.

Bruce ordered the massive amount of items and let Damian back onto the floor when the toddler tried to break the computer. He was figuring out how to get all of the things he'd just ordered to the mansion without arousing suspicion, and considered calling in a favor with the lanterns, except that was a little too flashy. Maybe he'd ask Clark to help. Or Flash.

He noticed the toddler waddling off in the direction of the bookshelves again, but this time he was too far away to stop him. Bruce decided to observe. Damian kept glancing back at him on the couch, and was finally standing by the bookshelf, looking up at his brothers, jumping high in the air above him.

"Damian," Bruce said warningly, because he knew that damn look, and his petulant little toddler grabbed the first shelf, nose high in the air. "**Get away from the bookshelf. You'll hurt yourself.**"

"No!" Damian shouted, and Bruce sighed, putting the computer down and walking over.

"**Fine. Climb**," he said when he was sitting behind him, ready to catch him. Now Damian didn't look so sure anymore. He gave Bruce a hesitant look, and Bruce patted his diapered bum. "**C'mon. I'm right here to catch you.**"

Damian had probably only started this because he wanted to rebel against Bruce. Now he kept glancing over his shoulder, like was trying to back out.

"**You don't have to, little prince**," Bruce pointed out, but that nickname was apparently the wrong thing to use, because Damian's face became determined instead as he grabbed a bookshelf and heaved himself up. He got a good yard and a half off the ground before he glanced back at Bruce, eyes wide. Bruce plucked him off the bookshelf. "**Look at you! You did very good, Damian.**"

At that, Damian preened in his father's arms, and Bruce couldn't stop himself from smiling at his prideful little baby.

"Bruce, catch me!" came Jason's shout from up top, and Bruce swore, quickly putting Damian on the ground and snagging Jason out of the air. The ten-year-old laughed like crazy, but Bruce's heart was beating fast with fear. If he hadn't caught Jason, he would've dropped like a bag of bricks and broken his neck.

"The rest of you, get down. It's tea time, anyway," Bruce said, swallowing hard as he watched Dick and Tim climb down the bookshelves. Tim nearly slipped, and Bruce was there within a second, grabbing him and gently setting him down on his feet.

Alfred opened the door to the library and stepped in.

"Tea is served in the lower right sitting room," he relayed, and disappeared again. Bruce's cellphone began ringing.

"Right, go, all of you," he said, shooing his children out of the library and closing the door behind him to prevent more near-heart attacks. Damian toddled on, with Dick holding his hand, and Jason grabbed for Tim and gave him a noogie. Tim elbowed him off and whined until Dick stroked his hair back into some semblance of normalcy and told Jason off.

Bruce picked up his phone. 'Clark' was flashing on the screen, and he

frowned.

"Hello Clark," he said.

"Hey, are you alright?" Clark asked quickly, sounding worried.

"What? Yeah, I'm fine. Why would you call and ask that?" Realization struck. "Are you spying on me again? We've talked about how invasive that is, Clark," Bruce growled.

Clark sputtered out a protest, but Bruce just took a deep, angry breath.

"You stop listening to my hearbeat *right now*, Kal-El," Bruce said sharply, and Clark shut up. The line was silent for a moment.

"You're mean when you use my full name," Clark pouted.

"It's very effective," Bruce argued. "We've talked about this. It's invasive and rude and I've told you how it annoys me."

"What about the cameras?"

"What cameras?"

"The cameras at my place! That's invasive and rude of you!" Bruce blinked slowly.

"You need to get out of your apartment," he said, following his children to the lower right sitting room, but stopping in the doorway as they converged around the table with biscuits and hot tea.

"What?" Clark asked, sounding gobsmacked.

"How long have they been there?"

"A week, maybe. Aren't they yours?"

"No. Have you switched into costume in your apartment in this past week?"

"What? I don't think so. They're not yours?"

"Clark," Bruce sighed impatiently. "No. The cameras are not mine. Damage control. Have you shown your suit to the cameras?"

"Not that I can remember, no."

"Pack a bag before you come over for dinner. I'll have Babs run the place, but you can't operate there before she's cleared it."

"Operate? Bruce, I *live* there. I have one small apartment, I can't go live in another one of my properties while you have my place bug-checked. I'd have nowhere to go."

"You could stay at your mother's. I know she'd be happy to have you."

"Stop talking to my Ma behind my back."

"I'm not. She's the one that calls me," Bruce countered. Clark huffed.

"Ma's in a tight place right now, and so am I. I don't want to bother her," he explained. Bruce pressed his lips together. No matter that he was a billionaire, both Kents refused to take any of his money. Martha because she thought he was too kind, and Clark because he was too stubborn.

"Babs will be quick about it. You can stay here. She'll be done in a night," Bruce said. "Just know that I'm sending her over and if you're incidentally there, it's your own fault."

"I live there!" Clark said, again, but he could feel the tips of his ears heat up and his stomach was making little flips. Another night at the mansion with Bruce and the kids. "Gosh, fine. I don't want to intrude, is all."

"I live in a mansion. If I wanted to, I could stay at least a hundred yards away from you all night," Bruce said in a deadpan, and Clark laughed.

"You like me too much for that."

"Hmmm. Dinner is at five-thirty. Don't be late." And then he hung up.

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter is pretty long to make up for me being unsure of when the next update will be. Comments and kudos will definitely help speed up the process, but I'm also writing like two essays and have a test on friday, so you guys can practically forget all about an update until at least the weekend.
> Anyways, I hope you enjoyed!! I love hearing your thoughts

about this, because do I know what I'm doing? NOT IN THE LEAST. <3<3<3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clark packed a bag as soon as he got home around five, feeling the cameras' stares on the back of his neck as he went around gathering socks and what he'd need for work tomorrow. Was it weird that he'd automatically assumed that it was Bruce's cameras? The man wasn't very good at grasping personal boundaries. He pondered how to talk to Bruce about it as he flew towards Gotham.

"Hey, Superman! Help!" The call was coming from right below him, and Clark took a peek at the clock. He still had a good ten minutes before he had to be at Bruce's. He could be quick about it.

Just a couple of mooks trying to rob a bank, but they put up a remarkable resistance, and he didn't like having to hurt normal people, so he went easy on them. A little too easy, maybe. By the time he was done, he was late for dinner.

Clark shot off in the general direction of Gotham and listened out for Bruce's slow, steady heartbeat. It had really freaked him out earlier today when he'd been listening with half an ear and that same slow heartbeat had spiked like crazy. Bruce was generally very good at controlling his body's responses, and Clark was honestly at a loss for what could've made him lose control like that.

He flew in through the cave, hurried to the top of the stairs and changed as he came out of the clock, nearly tripping and landing on his ass.

"Ow," Clark muttered, more out of reflex than anything, and stood up.

"I thought I said don't be late," Bruce said as he appeared from the shadows, and Clark nearly had a heart attack, jumping a foot into the air and staying there.

"Christ! You're in your own home, Bruce! Why do you have to hide in the shadows?" Clark asked, planting his feet back on the ground again.

"To be able to punish you for being late, obviously," Bruce said, spinning around on his heel and making his way towards the dining hall.

"Sorry I'm late. Robbery in Metropolis. I had to help them," Clark explained, flying a little to catch up with Bruce's brisk steps towards the dining room. "I'm only, what, ten minutes late."

"Children have a bad grasp on time," Bruce said, his voice toneless.

"What, are they upset they had to wait?"

"Of course. They're *children*," Bruce repeated as they entered the dining room.

"Clark!" Jason cheered. "Food! Now!"

Clark laughed as Dick hopped over to him, embracing him. He patted Dick's back and brushed back Damian's hair and everything felt strangely domestic. If it hadn't been so silly, Clark would've said something to Bruce about it, but then Tim started talking about Library Pirates, and he was sort of side-tracked.

Children had the silliest imaginations sometimes.

Dinner was a bustling, loud affair, with Damian yelling in Farsi and Bruce soothing him, and Jason hurling insults at Dick and getting affection back. Alfred sat down after the children shouted for him, and Tim already had table manners like an aristocrat at the age of seven.

Jason only had to be diverted twice from throwing food, and both of those times, Bruce was the one to see it start to happen and then stop him. Clark was sort of surprised Bruce still remembered his kids' body-language like that, seeing as Clark hadn't seen it coming either of the times.

The boys helped Alfred put the dishes away after dinner, even Damian grabbing a glass with two hands and determinedly walking in line behind his brothers to the kitchen. Bruce watched on, a bemused glint in his eyes, and Clark smiled at him, only to have Bruce's glittering blue eyes meet his and have the smile returned. Butterflies that felt achingly familiar by now fluttered around in his stomach, and Clark tried to hide how lovesick he was feeling.

Dessert was ice cream. Now that Jason had neapolitan ice cream, he didn't fuss, just ate happily. They were nearly done with their ice

cream when Steph appeared in the doorway.

"Oh wow, still tiny," she said in shock.

"Time for patrol already?" Bruce asked, surprised as he looked at his watch.

"Well, Cass and I were gonna check out some new toys before we went," Steph said, leaning against the wooden arch leading into the fancy room. "So not just yet. Just thought I'd take a look at the tiny bats, is all. Hi guys."

"Steph!" Tim said, surprisingly loudly over the chorus of 'hello's and everyone gave him surprised looks, except for Stephanie, who absolutely beamed at him.

"Hi Tim. How's being seven treatin' ya?" she asked.

"Not a lot of people think I'm smart anymore," Tim relayed.

"Well, I know for a fact you're pretty smart, pretty boy," she grinned. "Wanna play with my grapple gun while I get ready to go out?"

"Can I, Broose?" Tim asked, looking excited as he looked first at Bruce and then Clark.

"If I hear *anything* about Tim being high enough up in the air that he could fall and break a single bone in his body, you're benched for a month," Bruce said firmly, and Steph laughed.

"Of course, Mr. Overprotective Dad. C'mon Timmy, let's go. Chop chop." Tim scrambled off his chair and went around the table to get to Steph quickly, hopping up on her back when she crouched down.

Cassandra peeked into the room, stroked a quick finger down Damian's cheek, ruffled Jason's hair, kissed Dick on the cheek, then gave Bruce a quick peck on his forehead, before giving Clark a thoughtful look. Then she grabbed Clark's chin gently, and tipped his head back to give his forehead a kiss. Nodding to herself, she then disappeared down the hall.

"When he says 'if he hears something' bad stuff is gonna happen, that just means you don't have to tell him," Stephanie said as she followed Cass with Tim down the hall, and Clark brushed off his laughter as a cough.

"Huh," Jason said suspiciously, looking between Bruce and Clark, sinking on his chair. "Cass only ever does that to B." Dick had the same surprisingly calculating look on his face, and even Bruce looked a little thoughtful.

"Hmmm," Bruce agreed.

"Uh, guys? Getting a little creepy," Clark chuckled, feeling himself blush. He liked that Cassandra felt comfortable enough around him to give him any kind of affection, but was it really that big of a deal that they had to stare at him like an especially puzzling animal at a zoo?

Jason's eyes just narrowed further, and then he disappeared underneath the table. That grabbed Dick's attention, and he giggled and disappeared underneath the table too. Bruce blinked, and then gave a long-suffering sigh.

"We need to get their toys here, and quickly."

"You bought them toys?" Clark asked. "Probably a good idea, really. They'll be bored out of their mind in a day or two. Tim's already making up imaginary games. Library pirates. Cute, huh?"

"They were playing library pirates this morning before we ordered the toys," Bruce relayed, and Damian slammed his tiny fists against the board on his high-chair.

"Toy!" he said very seriously, and Bruce took his napkin, wiping Damian's ice cream sticky hands down as he spoke.

"I can't keep them jumping on bookshelves for however long this will take to reverse. My children aren't great with imagination. Drawing conclusions, seeing patterns, sure, but as you can see, Tim just went off to play with a grapple hook, and the other two are wrestling under a table. There's only so much devastation this manor can take," he said patiently.

"You mean you seriously let your kids hop around on bookshelves? Bruce, that's so dangerous!" Clark exclaimed, aghast.

"Calculated risk. They've got too good balance and reflexes to really be their respective ages, which leads me to believe they've gotten some of their original abilities transferred as well as interests, people they're close to, and the ability to make Alfred want to resign," Bruce stated. Clark scoffed out a laugh.

"Right. So we need to get them their toys so Alfred doesn't have to resign and the manor gets to keep standing," Clark agreed, and got a small smile for his troubles. That made him feel hot and cold all over, and he looked down at the white, clean tablecloth.

"Yes. And I've got trucks booked. They just need to have someplace to go, and then I thought you could pick the containers up."

"Are you kidding me? Don't you think that's going a little far?"

"I think it's very suspicious that Bruce Wayne orders truckfuls of toys all of a sudden. If the press hears about it, what conclusion do you think they'll draw?"

"That you suddenly have a bunch of small kids? Or have started a small children's hospital in the left-over rooms of your manor maybe? Or maybe you've adopted a small children's hospital?" Clark suggested thoughtfully. Bruce gave him a dry look, and Clark grinned back.

"Very funny. Would you do it?"

"Lift some containers into your yard and then back?" Clark asked skeptically. "I mean... Sure?"

"Good. They're waiting for you at the pier," Bruce said, reaching in under the table. When he sat back, he had managed to snag the back of Jason's shirt and managed to get him out from under the table.

"Hey!" Jason said, sounding sort of pissed.

"Dick, could you take Damian with you to the living room?" Bruce asked, and Dick's head popped out from under the table, much to Damian's amusement.

"Yeah, sure, B!" Dick said with a happy grin. "We're gonna have so much fun, little D!"

"How about we go read some 'Pride and Prejudice', Jason?" Bruce asked, standing up and carrying Jason with him like there was no argument to be had about this. Dick picked Damian up out of his high chair, giving him a loud, wet smooch on his little baby cheeks. Damian looked at Dick like he was possibly an alien.

"Wha's that?" Jason asked, and although he struggled a little in Bruce's arms, it was more of a wiggle to make out how hard Bruce's grip on him was. When he thought nobody was looking, he leaned his chin

against Bruce's shoulder, relaxing a little. Clark's heart ached for the little boy.

"You'll like it," Bruce promised as the two of them disappeared out of the room through the archway, and Dick and Damian took off for the kitchen, leaving Clark all alone, and feeling an odd sort of ache in his chest.

The containers had been where Alfred directed him to, and Clark had set them down in the back yard, by the patio, and Dick and Tim had immediately emerged from the house with intent looks on their faces.

Apparently Alfred had caught Steph and Tim on top of the huge penny in the cave, which was decidedly a bone-breaking height, and had sent Steph and Cass into a sparring room, if they were going to insist on doing neck-breaking activities. Tim had been herded into the kitchen to watch as Alfred baked cookies and made sure Damian wasn't trying to get away from under his watchful eye. Clark found it sort of hilarious how intent Damian was on getting into things he shouldn't be near.

When Clark had opened the cargo-door, both Dick and Tim had disappeared into the container, emerging only occasionally to show a precious new toy. Damian, who was very dismayed, remained with Alfred in the house.

Together, they transported the majority of the smaller toys into the house, and Clark picked up the big things. Bruce and Jason were still tucked away in the library in a loveseat, and Clark was guilty of occasionally tuning in, hearing Bruce patiently teach Jason what the fancy wording meant. Jason, for his part, seemed really into it, and Clark just liked listening to Bruce's low voice.

They'd filled two whole sitting rooms with things, and Tim and Dick kept dashing between the two, putting things in piles and finding clothes that they wanted to put on. Soon enough, Tim was wearing leggings, a dress, a sweater, and two different socks. Dick was a fashion disaster as always, combining a bright orange shirt and green pants with a crazy-blue sweater.

Tim was a bit more organized than Dick about sorting and opening toys. Dick just went on a half-rampage, leaving half the room in a disarray as what was before a general mess became piles.

After finding a whole dismantled jungle gym in one of the containers, Clark made sure the containers were cleared out before flying them back to their trucks. Trying to help the two of them sort through their things was practically impossible, so after a while, Alfred offered some late-night tea and sat him down in one of the couches.

"So how was your day? Did you do anything fun?" Clark asked as Tim tossed him a pair of socks.

"Open them?" Clark did as asked, and placed the socks on top of the coffee table in front of him.

"We played library pirates and then we took a walk around the grounds and said hi to Bruce's parents, and then Jason and I sparred in the batcave until Bruce found us, and he was pretty mad so we had to sit in different rooms for a while, but Alfred helped me get the TV on, and then we had lunch and then Damian took a nap and scratched Tim when he woke up, and-"

"Breathe, Dick," Clark chuckled, and looked on the other side of the room. He'd noticed the scratch on Tim's neck but hadn't thought all that much about it. Kids get bruises and bumps all the time. "What happened, Tim?"

"Damian was napping in Broose's room and I was just gonna grab Broose's tablet because he said I could have a game on it, but when I walked in to take it, Damian woke up and was crying," Tim said, looking uncomfortable. "Why do babies cry so much?"

"Well, they're small! They don't know everything yet," Dick said, sounding very sure of himself as he emerged on top of a pile of things, holding onto a golden-glittery rope thoughtfully, before tossing it to Clark. "There's Jason's lasso of truth. Put that in his pile."

"Why do babies cry so much, Clark?" Tim asked, coming from across the room and sitting down on top of the coffee table. He'd picked up a rubriks cube along the way, and was carefully trying to get it out of it's plastic and cardboard casing.

"Dick is right, I think. Everything is new for them, and sometimes when new things happen, it scares us. I think it's a little different for Damian though," Clark said, smiling down at the lasso. There was a picture of Diana on the cardboard holding the lasso, and it was very cute that Jason liked Wonder Woman like that. He'd nearly forgotten that, while Batman's sidekicks, Robins had a tendency to idolize other superheroes.

Maybe it'd slipped his mind because Damian was even less impressed with him than Bruce was.

"Why's it different for Damian?" Tim asked, finally getting his rubriks cube out and twisting it with an intent look of concentration on his face. Clark dutifully placed the lasso in Jason's pile.

"He's had a scary upbringing."

"He's two." Clark blinked as Tim looked up just to shoot him a skeptical look, surprisingly reminiscent of Bruce's same look.

"It's worse when he's older," Clark said distantly. "I think something's bad happened already. You're observant kids. Tell me what you've seen."

"He doesn't know what kisses are," Dick said, sounding a little upset. "He makes this gobsmacked fish-face whenever I give him a kiss."

"Bruce had nail-marks on his arm this morning from nails the size of Damian's," Tim relayed. "And he cried when he woke up. Nightmares."

Clark blinked. Even for Tim, that was a pretty good leap. Dick's face was sad.

"Man, that sucks. Damian's just a baby. He deserves better! I'm gonna give him more kisses," he declared from on top of his pile, and Clark smiled.

"That's the right attitude." Tim frowned at Dick and hopped off the table, placing the rubriks cube in his pile before disappearing again.

The doors opened, and Jason shot out as if from a cannon into the room, and immediately he and Dick began happily chatting loudly about their new toys. Even though he was excited, there was less of a nervous, twitchy energy about him than before. A little calmer, maybe. Bruce sighed and reached out for Clark's half-drank cup of tea.

"Thank you," Bruce said when Clark let him have it, and Clark watched as his long, strong fingers wrapped around the mug as he sat down on the couch next to Clark.

"Broose, look!" Tim said, dashing forward with a science kit in hand.

"Very nice, Tim," Bruce agreed as Tim again hopped up on the coffee

table, getting distracted by the rubriks cube again. "Did everything arrive?"

"So far, I don't think that anything else can arrive without your manor exploding. Honestly Bruce, how do you have this much money to spend on this sort of stuff?"

"Did I ever tell you I'm a billionaire? As in... Nine zeros?" Bruce said in a deadpan, and Clark rolled his eyes.

"Alright, alright, fine. I get it. You're a billionaire, but you don't become a billionaire by spending all of your money on things like this!"

"When my children are turned back into their own respective ages, I'll donate all this stuff to a charity, and I'll recieve more money because of how kind I am," Bruce promised. "The undamaged things will go, at least. And I'm sure the clothes Dick's wearing would fit Damian."

"I don't think Damian would want to wear that, ever," Clark replied with a chuckle. Bruce hummed.

"Fair enough," he agreed, and Clark was suddenly hyperaware that their shoulders were brushing, as well as their knees. It was nice, to be surrounded by children's laughter and Bruce's warmth. He chided himself for thinking about that just as Tim held the rubriks cube out to Bruce.

"Solve it?" he asked silently, and Bruce took one look at the cube.

"I wouldn't know how. Why don't you ask Jason?"

"Why would Jason know?" Tim asked skeptically, and Bruce smiled at Tim, a small, secret smile.

"Trust me."

Tim hopped off the table and crawled up onto Jason's pile, asking for help.

"Well, see, Timbo, it's all about the patterns."

"Obviously! It's a cube with colors," Tim said, sounding sort of offended that someone would think him that stupid.

"Lemme finish, idiot," Jason said impatiently, and then began explaining thoroughly how to solve a cube, twisting thoughtfully as he

went, and Tim had that same concentrated face on again.

"Why Jason? You'd be able to solve that," Clark asked curiously. Bruce raised an eyebrow at Clark.

"Last time I tried to solve a rubriks cube was maybe seven years ago, when Jason was obsessed with them for a brief period of time. If I had to, I could probably do it in half an hour. Jason's record was two minutes, at his best."

"Does Tim know how to do them?"

"Not usually, no. He likes puzzles, and he's very smart, sure, but there's a clear cut difference between Tim and Jason's intelligences. Both are pattern-seekers, but Jason is much better at algorithms. Tim tends to like solving mysteries more than the art that is a rubriks cube. Did the jungle gym arrive with the other things?"

"Yeah, the pieces are in the other room."

"Let's be efficient and set it up."

"Right now? And leave the kids without supervision?" Clark asked.

"Of course not. They'll get to bring toys as we set it up in the batcave," Bruce said, waving him off and setting the now empty tea cup onto the coffee table.

"Why are you setting the thing up in the batcave?" Clark asked incredulously.

"It's too big to put in a sitting room, and a little too suspicious to put in the backyard, sadly. Besides, Alfred would murder me if I let them ruin a chandelier."

"How big is it?" Bruce looked around the room, and when he couldn't find what he was looking for, he made a disgruntled face.

"Give me your phone," Bruce demanded, and Clark responded on autopilot when he heard that tone, handing over the phone before even registering it. Bruce effortlessly typed in his code, and despite them knowing each other so well, Clark liked to have at least the *illusion* that Bruce didn't know every single aspect of him.

"How did you know-"

"Your parents' wedding date," Bruce said without his thumbs ever

stopping their typing. "Not that hard, you sap. Ah, here it is." He handed over the phone, and Clark blinked.

"Jeeze, Bruce, did you seriously buy them a jungle gym that looks like an honest-to-god military boot camp track?" he asked Bruce incredulously, and Bruce raised his eyebrows.

"Clark, my children are trained in combat. Earlier today, I watched Jason drop down from a chandelier on top of Dick to prove a point. I think the jungle gym will be a good way to calm my nerves."

Clark chuckled at that, and pocketed his phone again. Bruce couldn't help but notice the way Clark's arm-muscles shifted at the movement, and wondered why that wasn't sorted away as unimportant in his brain's filter just about immediately.

"So, you're seeing this as an opportunity, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Setting up a crazy, military-style jungle gym in the batcave? You're gonna keep using it."

"Of course. I didn't spend 12 000 dollars on a jungle gym to use it for two weeks or less. It's durable enough that it should be able to hold at least Dick, Jason, and Tim at their normal weights and sizes, all at the same time."

Clark sputtered.

"12 000 dollars? Bruce, that's like... six of my rents!" Bruce made a 'so?' face, and Clark gaped. "Wow. That's... Absolutely crazy."

"It's an investment. However a little boring in comparison to the excercises my children have come up with, it's a safer option. Besides, if I'm in Aspen, I might as well get some things done. It'd be better during the day if I could leave Alfred with just one child, so the jungle gym goes in the batcave."

When Clark just stared at Bruce, those blue eyes, surrounded by thick eyelashes, turned to him, and stared back. Finally, Clark just blushed, and turned away.

"I'm sure you're right."

"So, could you move the pieces from the sitting room over to the

batcave? That'd be great," Bruce said, standing up and getting a rope tossed at him. He turned to look at three of his children, hiding behind a pile of toys, giggling. His lips twitched. "Is this your new Lasso of Truth, Jason?"

"Fuck yeah! And look, I have the tiara to match!" Jason said proudly, standing up to show off the distinct golden band with a red star appearing in his messy raven hair.

"Language," Bruce warned. "But very nice. Pick four toys each you wanna take downstairs."

"We're going to the cave? Awesome!" Dick exclaimed, and scrambled over to another pile of toys. Jason hauled his lasso in, and grabbed another few toys, before all the bats began making their way to the door. All four of them navigated the cluttered floor without even looking like they were about to trip any second, and it sort of fascinated Clark.

"Are you coming, Clark?" Bruce asked patiently from the door, and Clark realized he was still sitting on the couch.

"Sorry, coming," Clark agreed, and instead of trying to walk, he cheated, and floated over to them. Bruce gave him a narrow-eyed look of warning, and Clark offered a sheepish smile in response as Dick grabbed hold of his hand and dragged him into the room with the jungle gym and Tim's new electric car.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being sweet!! Really helps and encourages me!!! Hope you enjoyed!! <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Was unable to post yesterday because of the maintenance, so here we go!
Thanks for being sweet and encouraging! You're the best!!!
Hope you enjoy!!! ＜3

The kids were excited for maybe ten minutes about them assembling the jungle gym, but the moment it was established that the only one with enough muscle to possibly help was Dick, they turned to their toys on the sparring mats. Dick tried wrestling with Jason again, but Jason brushed him off and instead managed to make a loop on his Lasso of Truth, and trapped Tim.

It went fairly quickly, maybe only two hours, since Clark could just hold the pieces up and Bruce would screw them on. Once it was finished, the boys began playing with it almost immediately, climbing in the ropes attached to the highest point and crawling on the cave floor to get to the other side of the rope-maze. It really was pretty sweet, and Clark just watched them fool around for a while.

"Mister Kent? Your mother called the phone in the upper right second sitting room," Alfred said from the top of the stairs, and the reporter shot Bruce an incredulous look as the other man sat down in his computer chair.

"What?"

"You talk to my mother often enough that she has a house phone number for you? Jeeze, Bruce," Clark said, putting his hands on his hips and grinning at his best friend. Bruce pressed the tips of his fingers against each other, and leaned back in his chair.

"She can be.... Very persuasive," Bruce admitted, and Clark laughed, flashing his teeth, and Bruce again noticed how straight they were and how Clark's cheekbones became much more prominent when he smiled like that. Useless information, and yet he was noticing it. Odd.

"Well, I better soothe her fears," Clark chuckled, taking off for the stairs, and Alfred came down with Damian in his arms, plopping him

down in Bruce's lap with a pointed look before disappearing again.

Bruce adjusted Damian, and looked at the other kids out of the corner of his eye to make sure they weren't trying to kill each other. Thankfully, they were being pretty loud, and now Jason was a princess in a high tower and Dick had to climb his hair (the rope), to get to him and make s'mores with him. Bruce was unsure of why, exactly, but they seemed to find it amusing, and it gave Bruce the chance to work on his own.

Damian had taken a nap earlier today, but it seemed like it was nearing bedtime now. Bruce leaned back and let Damian settle with his one cheek against Bruce's stomach, snoozing silently while Bruce decided that since he couldn't go out and hunt down leads, he might as well start on that suit-upgrade for Dick.

"Holy hot cakes, Batman! That's me?" Dick asked happily as he appeared over Bruce's shoulder. It was odd, hearing him say that without any sarcasm.

"Yes, that's you. Nine years from what you are now," Bruce agreed. "Be quiet. Damian's sleeping." Dick nodded, eyes big as he glanced down at Damian.

"But... Wow! I'm so hot! Do I have a girlfriend?" he stage-whispered, and Bruce considered that.

"Boyfriend, I think." He watched Dick's face out of the corner of his eye to gauge his reaction. Dick looked shocked, but what he asked after was not what Bruce had been expecting.

"You *think*? I haven't *told* you?"

"We... Haven't been all that close, lately," he said truthfully, because when he looked into Dick's young, serene face, he remembered other times. When he had been young and hurt, and had found someone like him. They'd had fun, in the beginning. Before the villains got more dangerous. Before Dick grew up.

His young ward scuffed his feet against the cave floor before hopping up on the control panel and tilting his head in surprise.

"How come?" he asked.

Bruce found himself letting out a chuckle, gently ruffling Dick's soft, thick hair and placing his other hand on the back of Damian's gently

rising ribcage. Young Dick leaned into the gesture, not finding it odd at all. Bruce's heart was aching as he watched Dick look worried that they hadn't been talking. "It's complicated."

"That's just what grown-ups say when they don't want to talk about something." Bruce scoffed, and his ward raised his eyebrows at him challengingly.

"Do we?"

"Yeah! It's the same answer Alfie gave us when Jason asked if Clark and you are dating," Dick declared. "And Clark gets flustered about it, and you do the same thing but, y'know, more stealthily."

Bruce couldn't remember the last time he was flustered, but Dick's certainty was immovable.

"Why would Jason ask if we're together?" Dick gave him a look like grown ups were idiots, and he was being particularly dense. It was a sweet look when it wasn't laced with venom.

"Because you totally are! Except you don't kiss. *Yet*," he added conspiratoriously.

"I am not in love with Clark. We are not a couple," Bruce said, and the twinkle in Dick's eyes really was quite alarming now that Bruce applied it to this context. "Dick..."

"Oh, no, B. I hear ya. Loud and clear," Dick said, still smiling as he hopped off the computer panel. He brushed his hands off and went back to the jungle gym, immediately engaging Tim in some game of chase on top of the gym.

Bruce was just considering getting Jason down and asking him why the hell he'd ask Alfred about something like that, when he recieved a video call from Babs. He answered on one of the smaller screens, and leaned back in his chair again when Damian began making fussing noises.

"How's it going, B?" Babs asked when the screen lit up, a knowing smile on her face that made Bruce feel incredibly cornered for some reason. He didn't let it show as he rubbed his hand in circles against Damian's back to get him back to sleep.

"Fine. How did it go with the sweep?"

"Are you *sure* these cameras aren't yours and is just an excuse for Clark to stay over? Because, believe me, I think the best way to get Clark to live with you, is just-"

"They're not mine," Bruce said firmly, cutting her off, and Babs pursed her lips.

"Well, they're our tech, for one. So it's one of you crazy boys," she remarked. Bruce furrowed his eyebrows.

"Hmmm. Have you watched the footage?"

"Yes. Clark does not, to everyone's disappointment, sleep naked," she stated. When Bruce narrowed his eyes at her, she rolled her eyes, and leaned against the desktop in front of her. "Mostly it was just him living his life. He was right, the cams have been there for eight days. No way of seeing the cape though. There are glitches where he clearly uses his super-speed to those of us who know who he is, but to everyone else, they would just look like glitches. They're not transmitters, though. Just recorders."

"So nobody was watching live?"

"Nope. I don't know which one of you knuckleheads put them there, but you'd have to come back when Clark wasn't home to get the footage." She refocused on Damian sleeping against Bruce's stomach, and smiled. "Wow. I wish he was this quiet and calm when he's his real age. That'd make for calmer family nights."

"Oh, don't let this fool you," Bruce said, stroking Damian's head a little. "He likes to scream even more now. You just caught us at an opportune moment."

Babs smiled.

"He looks a lot like you, y'know." Bruce only hummed. "So how are the other little rascals? Drivin' you up the wall yet?"

"Well, Jason's asked about Barbie. Not the toy, I checked. Dick, too, has expressed a want to see you. I'd like you to join us for dinner sometime. Dick could use the calming influence."

"Not a babysitter, B," Barbara said cheerfully, but there was a steely glint in her eyes. "You deal with this. This is on you. I'll have dinner with you, but if you try to make me stay over, I'll steal one of your cars and leave."

Bruce chuckled.

"Fine. I just thought you'd enjoy seeing Dick in his thirteen-year-old glory. Let me tell you, it brings up some memories," he relayed. Babs bit her lip, and corrected her glasses.

"If Alfred makes that goulash he's so good at, I'd be ready to set up a possible negotiation," she replied a little haughtily. Bruce nodded.

"As you wish. I'll pass it on."

"Great. What do you want me to do with the cameras?"

Bruce hesitated, before shrugging internally.

"Send the footage to me, and shut them all down. I'll talk to Alfred about the goulash," he said, and before he could hang up, he saw the same, knowing smile flash over her lips, a glint in her eye.

"Sure, B."

Once the kids had been fed a last, quick night-snack and put back to bed, Bruce was in his bathroom, brushing his teeth. He wasn't in the least tired, but if he could just sneak off to the batcave without Alfred catching him, he might be able to sneak off for a quick skim around the problem-areas. He walked by Damian, sleeping on his bed.

He'd bought a crib that could connect with the bed so Damian would be nearby but also so he'd have his own space, except Bruce's little spoiled toddler had woken up the moment he put him down on the little connecting bed, and rolled over onto the silk sheets with a 'who do you think I am, a peasant?' look before promptly knocking out again, spread like a starfish.

Bruce had just managed to slip out of the room, when he felt a presence behind him, and turned to find Tim standing there, in his Superboy shirt, looking sort of distraught.

"Hey, Tim, what's the matter?" Bruce asked, hoping he could get Tim to bed quickly and take off into Gotham.

"I can't sleep," Tim said softly.

"You've only been trying for maybe half an hour. I'm sure you'll be able to sleep if you just close your eyes, and lay down, snuggled up in

your bed for a little longer," Bruce promised.

Tim blinked at him in silence for a minute.

"I want to sleep in your room." Bruce chuckled.

"You're perfectly capable of sleeping on your own, I promise. Your bed is just as soft as mine."

"It's not the same. I want *your* bed," Tim said softly.

"You have your own bed, Tim," Bruce said patiently, sinking down on his haunches to better level with him. Tim's blue eyes met his, and immediately became wet like huge orbs. Bruce actually felt his body twitch to reach out and comfort him. The kid was good. Had to give him that. "Oh, save the waterworks, kid. I know all your tricks. You'll get what you want." Tim blinked at Bruce owlishly, the tears magically disappearing.

"Wha-" he yawned, wrapped his arms around Bruce's neck, and sighed. "What do you mean?" Since nobody was around and Tim wasn't looking, Bruce let himself grin. His face wasn't used to too many genuine grins, at least not ones that weren't a little bit blood-thirsty, so he didn't keep it up for long. He might not be getting out to bring justice tonight, but at least he could appreciate that his kids were pretty good at getting what they wanted.

"You think you're sneaky," Bruce scoffed, but picked Tim up and settled him against his hip, cracking open the door to his bedroom. "Damian is asleep, so you have to be quiet. Okay, Tim?"

Tim nodded, his head now hanging limply against Bruce's shoulder in that remarkable kids-can-nap-anywhere-in-any-position way. He gently deposited him on the bed, and was just about to silently slip away again, when Tim reached out for him.

"Broose? Aren't you coming?" Bruce took one last look back at the door, still open just a bit, and sighed.

"Of course, Tim," he promised, and chucked his shirt, sliding in under the sheets. Tim climbed on top of him, curling up, and Damian snuggled up to his side, and Bruce was unable to move without disturbing them now. Smart kids, like he'd said.

He waited until he was sure the two of them were completely asleep before trying again to slip out. Tim was easy enough to slide onto the

bed, and Damian was a little harder, but he managed, rolling out of bed without disturbing the two sleeping occupants.

Without making a sound, Bruce padded to the door, slipping out into the hallway. He was just about to make his way down to the cave again, when he heard a door opening, and shuffling.

"Bruce?" Clark said, rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses as Bruce turned around. He didn't even need those to see. Just for cover, to become Clark Kent. He wasn't that Clark Kent here, or even Kal-El of Krypton, or Superman. He was just a big, scruffy guy in flannel pajama pants that looked like they'd seen better years, and he was still wearing his glasses. He should be Clark here, not Clark Kent.

Bruce stepped forward and took his glasses off his face, folding them in his hands as he spoke. He was obviously not in the least getting out of his house tonight. He had full faith in the girls, he reminded himself. He didn't need to monitor them. Except he wanted to.

"Babs has removed the cameras from your apartment, but I advise you to remain vigilant."

"Well, that's your motto, so of course you're trying to convince me of the same thing," Clark pointed out as Bruce shoved the glasses into Clark's pajamapants pocket, feeling his fingers brush against a warm thigh through fabric. Hmmm. He really needed to meditate soon, think this through.

Bruce gave Clark a blank look, and Clark just grinned goofily. Bruce didn't like that one bit, except he sort of did.

"So, who put them there? Anyone we need to get answers from?" Clark asked curiously. Bruce pursed his lips.

"It seems one of my children placed them there. Not one of the girls, seeing as Cassandra has no reason to, and Steph is terrible at hiding cameras. Babs is too mature. So, it was one of the boys. I can't deduce which one, however, since none of them remember what happened before they were turned into children. If I had to guess, I'd say Dick. Possibly Tim, if coerced. Damian wouldn't care."

"Your kids bugged me? Why?" Clark asked, bewildered. Bruce hummed.

"Dick used to worship you. Maybe it's coming back." Clark sputtered.

"That can't be right! He hasn't been acting any differently lately, has he?" Bruce raised an eyebrow at Clark.

"Clark. My children can lie to me and I won't notice. You? I can tell just by looking at you. If they can trick me, why not you?" Clark looked a little horrified at that.

"What've they slipped by you, Bruce?"

"Surprisingly, normal teenage things. 'I was with the titans' when they were actually trying to hunt down a lead. 'I didn't go to a party' when they did. Mostly Dick, now that I think about it. Tim is good too. Damian is too brash. Jason tells me very loudly when he's breaking rules."

"So they never really slip you, sometimes you don't just notice because it's not the priority to deal with teenage lies when there are criminals to be caught?" Clark asked pointedly, and Bruce pressed his lips together as he thought. Then he gave a slight nod.

"Your observation isn't half-bad. Might be able to make you into a responsible superhero one day," Bruce said thoughtfully, and Clark scoffed.

"Thanks for that. I appreciate your seal of approval." Bruce scoffed back as there was a creaking sound. Both turned to look at the source of it.

"Bruce? I heard talking," Jason said, looking tense as he stood in his doorway. Bruce chuckled lowly.

"Couldn't sleep either? Join your brothers in the bed," Bruce said, waving Jason towards his room, and Jason's shoulders almost immediately relaxed as he first opened Dick's door, and disappeared. He then emerged with a half-asleep Dick dragged behind him, and pulled him into Bruce's room.

"Another sleepover?" Clark asked, his smile sweet and small.

"Why do they even have their own beds if they're not going to use them?" Bruce asked the heavens, and Clark muffled his laughter in his fist.

"It's sweet," he admitted. "I mean, I doubt they'd do this at their real ages. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Depends on how you strategically place them in the same bed, but you're right, I do doubt it."

"Everyone close enough to touch Dick?" Clark guessed, and Bruce let his lips tug into a small smile.

"That obvious, huh? I need to tell them to work on that."

"No, no. Not in the least. Dick is a good sport about it, and they deserve to love someone like he loves them." Bruce hummed again, and the door to his room cracked open. Jason's head peeked out.

"Bruce?" he asked quietly.

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Clark can come too, y'know. If ya wanna bring 'm." Clark coughed and managed to both pull out and drop his glasses as his cheeks blushed, fumbling a few times before he caught them.

"No, uh- No need, Jase. I've got my own bed," Clark laughed a little nervously. Jason raised an eyebrow at him.

"So do I," he pointed out, and disappeared back into the room.

"Your cuddle-pile awaits," Clark said to Bruce, who huffed out a laugh.

"Don't call them that. It encourages them."

"Oh, don't tell me you don't love that. Go snuggle your kids, B. Good night."

"Good night," Bruce murmured, and walked back into his own room, closing the door behind himself silently.

The next morning, Clark didn't eat with the others. He went to work as usual, but before he could sneak off, Alfred had given him waffles and cereal and a coffee-mug to go again. He promised to return it next time he and Bruce met up, and before Alfred could say anything else, he took off for Metropolis.

He and Lois chased some leads for work, had a good lunch, and then worked on editing their material together before it was almost five, and Lois had a date to prepare herself for. She drove him home, and

Clark entered his apartment, flicking on the lights.

Not because he needed it, but he liked the warm glow of the lamp by his couch. Almost five pm exactly. By now, if he'd been over at Bruce's, the kids would be storming around, wanting dinner. Instead he was here, alone in a small apartment without anyone to eat dinner with, a silent apartment in a silent city.

It was for the better. He didn't need to be reminded of how sweet Bruce was with his kids, and he certainly didn't need the domesticity. Except Clark really missed it like crazy by the time he took out some frozen chicken to de-frost for dinner. He'd only been there two days, and he was suddenly crazy about sticking around?

Clark's phone chirped with a message just as he was about to settle on the couch with a book.

Dinner at the manor 5 pm. Don't be late again.

His stomach flipped a little, and he took a look at the clock. He had a good half-hour before he was expected. Clark tossed the chicken back into the freezer, took a shower, changed out of the shirt with a coffee-stain on it, and grabbed the thermos before taking off for Gotham again.

He took the main entrance for once, knocking on the door with a smile on his face. Bruce opened the door.

"Clark? What are you doing here?" he asked, maybe a little incredulous as he stepped back to let the reporter in.

"I'm here for dinner? You just texted me an invitation half an hour ago. You didn't want me for dinner, did you?" Clark realized, a little awkwardly.

"Clark!" Dick exclaimed happily, shooting out of the living room and attacking his legs in a hug. Jason was there next, jumping up to be caught by Clark. He laughed a little as Tim came into the entrance hall too, beaming at him.

"Hi guys! What sorta fun have you been up to today?"

"Bruce taught us to meditate all morning, but that got boring so we played with the jungle gym, and then we found new toys in the piles and played with those, and Jason can aim really good will Nerf guns!"

Jason shrugged a little, smiling like he didn't want to show how proud he was of that.

"'S nothin'," he murmured.

"I'm glad you've found something you're good at, Jase," Clark said, patting Dick on the back before being let go. He set Jason back on the ground and was immediately dragged into the dining room by the two of them. Bruce followed curiously, and noticed that Alfred had set out an extra plate.

"Were we expecting Clark?" he asked, and Alfred gave him an odd look.

"Of course we were, Sir," he said. "As well as Miss Barbara and Miss Stephanie. Are you quite alright, Master Bruce?"

"Yes, I'm- I'm fine, Alfred," Bruce said, a little surprised. He couldn't for the life of him remember inviting Clark for dinner now that his apartment was fixed. Obviously, the kids were thrilled to see him, though. He could stay for dinner, he supposed. Seeing as Alfred had set out a plate already.

Damian pinned Clark with an angry look when he sat down, and slammed his fists against the table.

"Cla'!" he pouted, and Clark looked so honestly baffled. It was sort of sweet, Bruce had to admit, however reluctantly.

"Oh, I didn't say hi to you, did I? I'm sorry, Damian," he chuckled, moving around the table to pick Damian up and grin at him. Damian pouted, but leaned back against Clark's side. "That was mean of me."

Damian was settled in Clark's arms for a full minute before he decided he'd had enough and made motions to be put back into his high-chair, and Clark obliged.

Just then, Cassandra entered the room, skipping her usual ritual of giving affection and instead just sitting down next to Jason, the little drama queen, who'd sat himself at the far end of the table, far away from everyone else.

"Oh Jesus Christ," came Barbara Gordon's shocked voice from the entrance, and everyone turned to look at her. Stephanie leaned against the doorframe behind her, grinning.

"Sup', my little peeps? Still small?" she asked the room, glancing at Babs' gobsmacked face.

"Still small," Tim replied, and Stephanie sat down next to him, grinning.

"Babs!" Dick exclaimed happily, jumping out of his chair to attack her in a hug, and Barbara still looked like a comet had struck her when she stared down at him.

"Oh jesus. Hi, Dick," she said. "Oh my god, B. You were right."

"I don't understand why you sound so shocked. I'm always right," Bruce stated, and Tim made a face that said he didn't really agree. Stephanie burst out laughing.

"Lookin' good Barbie!" Jason said from his side of the table, and Barbara looked over at him.

"Wasn't cute when you were this small the first time around, hasn't gotten cuter, Jaybird," she tossed back, and Jason frowned.

"Don't call me that!"

"Watch me!"

"With that splendid show of maturity, dinner may begin. Please take your seats, Miss Barbara, Master Richard," Alfred said as he appeared from the kitchen, holding a steaming pot of goulash in his hands.

As Bruce had predicted, Babs had a hard time parting from Dick once they'd been reunited. She enjoyed the relationship she had with Dick when it was so uncomplicated, and Dick just loved Babs. Always had, probably always would.

Since it wasn't quite time for patrol when dinner was over, they all relocated to one of the sitting rooms, all full and warm. However, the kids weren't as easy to slow down as the adults, so they were up playing within moments. Jason found the earlier mentioned Nerf guns, and started shooting at various objects until Alfred asked for him to save his shooting for things other than the good china.

"I didn't text you," Bruce said to Clark when they'd both sat down.

"But I got a text from you," Clark pointed out, pulling his phone out

and getting the conversation up on his phone. "See?"

Bruce hummed. That had come from his personal phone. He patted his pocket and found it right there. Very odd.

"I'll investigate," he relayed, and stood up, making his way to the doorway but not managing to make it out before Clark was there, in his way.

"How are you doing, by the way?" he said, stopping him from leaving the room. When Bruce gave him a blank glance, he smiled a little. "With not going out at night. Yesterday, you were totally trying to sneak out."

"I'm fine," Bruce said firmly, trying to walk around Clark and getting stopped yet again.

"Oh, I don't doubt it. You just feel, I don't know.... Jittery," Clark pointed out. Bruce let his eyes narrow.

"Jittery?" he said, letting every possible ounce of 'seriously?' seep into his tone. Clak shrugged.

"You don't do very well without Batman, is all. I'd be happy to babysit overnight if you want to go out again," he promised.

"You keep coming back. Is it my house, the food, or my butler you want?" Bruce asked a little jokingly.

"Your kids," Clark said without hesitation, and immediately flushed. "Not like that! I-I mean. I just- I like them. They're sweet. I'd love to spend more time with them. So, y'know. What do you say?"

"An emergency happens in the middle of the night, and you take off? No. Not happening, Clark," Bruce said, and tried to walk away again. When Clark stopped him again, he restrained himself from using violence to get Clark out of his way. "What is it you want that's stopping me from leaving?"

He began considering how to get out, and saw the golden opportunity with the Nerf gun lying on the bookshelf right at hip-level. Bruce had to stop himself from smirking.

"Nothing. It's nothing. You could probably wait to investigate who sent the text. It's not that big of a deal. You should stay with the kids."

"They've spent all day with me," Bruce said with a blank face as he shot Stephanie in the back of the head with a Nerfdart without looking and placed the gun out of sight. She yelped and immediately grabbed Jason by the scruff of the neck. "I honestly think it's just driving Jason closer to mutiny and making Tim more dependent on me."

"Why did you do that for?" Clark asked, bewildered. Bruce could hear as Jason sputtered at Steph's accusations, and when she began saying how it had hit her, Jason tracked the trajectory, and his eyes widened.

"It was *Bruce*!" he practically yelled at the top of his lungs, and Bruce wished he had his cape, because Tim emerged from behind the sofas with a battle cry, firing a round of foam darts at him.

He was ready to amuse his kids and get hit, seeing the opportunity for what it was, when Clark became a blur and stepped in front of him, shielding him.

"Sorry. Reflex?" he said questioningly, with a disarming, bright, innocent-looking smile. Bruce stared at him for a second, and then shook his head, letting a small smile see the light of day.

"Since when have I needed your help dodging bullets?"

And then he walked out of the room, leaving Clark feeling like he'd just been swindled and probably a little more besotted than he'd been earlier today.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce found Alfred in the kitchen, as he'd thought he would, cleaning up after dinner. It'd be a freezing day in Hell before Alfred left the kitchen anything but spotless after dinner.

"Will you be honest with me, Al?" Bruce asked, and the butler didn't even turn around.

"Of course, Master Bruce," he replied.

"Why did you say it was complicated when the kids asked if Clark and I were together?" Bruce walked around the kitchen island so that he could see Alfred's face. Alfred only raised an eyebrow at him.

"Because it is a bit complicated, wouldn't you say, Master Bruce?"

"Not really. We're not romantically attracted to each other."

"Of course, Master Bruce. You're entirely right," Alfred agreed, but Bruce felt a little bit like he was being mocked somehow.

"I am," he said firmly. Alfred sighed very quietly.

"If you insist, Master Bruce."

Bruce still didn't feel like he'd won this argument, but he rarely did when he was talking to Alfred anyways. His butler knew him too well. Instead of replying and feeling like more of an idiot, he nodded, and walked back out of the kitchen.

He would've bumped into Cassandra if the two of them hadn't been too good at dodging each other. She smiled briefly up at him, and Bruce caught her by the elbow before she could take off again.

"Are you alright?"

"Tired," Cassandra said softly, her brown eyes meeting his for a moment. Then she traced a fingertip underneath his eye. "You're not."

"The boys won't let me leave my bed in the night. They make me want to sleep."

"Who does otherwise?"

"Alfred," he said, a little suspicous. For Cassandra, that was an odd question.

"Is it?" she asked, tilting her head at him.

"Yes." She tilted her head

"No," she said, with certainty.

"No? Then who?" he asked.

"You're the detective," she said, before squeezing his arm and disappearing with a taunting smile.

He had taken his time meditating this morning, or at least tried, but the boys kept insisting he teach them too, as children were prone to do, and they weren't silent enough for him to really concentrate and find that space inside where he could just think, without any distractions. Damian had toppled a tray with medical instruments on it when he hadn't been looking, and there had been a heart-stopping moment when he thought Damian had been sliced in the foot, but he'd been fine.

Alfred had helped him switch bandages on his own stitches again, and tutted, tellling him to stop lifting the kids with that arm, that it wasn't helping it heal whatsoever when he tugged on them.

Maybe it was time to take a good half hour for himself now, at least. Taking off for his bedroom, he passed the sitting room everyone was in, just checking that chaos wasn't about to break out again.

Dick and Jason had their foam swords, and were battling again, Titus was resting on the couch, watching Damian, who was on the floor, drawing with crayons. Tim was doing one of those solve-the-mystery coloring books on the floor next to him, surprising everyone with their civility. All was calm, apparently too calm, because it didn't last long.

"Floor is lava!" Stephanie yelled, and for a full minute, the entire room fell into chaos as Dick jumped up in the chandelier, Jason scaled a bookcase, Tim hopped onto the coffee table, Barbara calmly put her feet up on the couch, and Stephanie hopped into Babs' lap.

"Clark, hurry, the floor is lava!" Tim urged, and Clark instantly floated in the air.

"That's cheating," Stephanie argued. "No superpowers in the mansion! Right, Barb?"

"Stephanie is right, Clark. Cheating is bad," Barbara deadpanned, and Clark laughed, floating down into a chair.

Damian was graciously saved from the lava by Tim helping him up on the table, and once they were off the floor, they began jumping around on the couches, skipping from one place to another. Jason made it off the bookcase and balanced on the back of the couch Steph and Barbara was sitting on. Dick gently set himself down on the coffee table with Damian, and got him up on his back before hopping over to the chair Clark was sitting in.

Clark was good with his kids, he had to admit. Or maybe his kids were good with Clark. That was also a possibility, considering Clark had trouble with Superboy, who was his own child.

Bruce took off, satisfied that they were safe, for the time being.

Settling down in sweatpants on the sparring mats, Bruce took a breath, and centered himself, drifting into the darkness. Soothing, of sorts. Silent, at least. Nothing was silent in his house anymore.

It was nice, he had to admit. Although he now had nowhere to hide anymore, he was less itchy to do so. Dick really was a sunbeam, and Jason's uproarious laughter was catchy, and Tim's quiet looks were really amusing. Damian was still as prideful as ever, without the full extent of his usual agression at his command.

One of them must have set the cameras out in Clark's place? Why? There was no real reason for them to do it. Right now, however, it was unimportant since he couldn't solve it right at this moment. When they were turned back into their respective ages, he could question them about it, but for now, useless information.

Who sent the text? Obviously someone who wanted Clark at the manor. For a nefarious purpose? The kids hadn't seen phones at this time in their respective ages, especially not smartphones, but Tim was a quick learner. Disturbingly quick learner. Tim was also quick to spread the word. Jason could pick-pocket. Probably a team-effort

then. They were children, they liked Clark, Clark wasn't coming back for dinner. Easy way to solve the problem would be to invite him back for dinner. It must have been them.

Speaking of Clark, why was his appearance suddenly of more importance than it'd been before? Maybe instincts. Children needed parents, plural, and God knows Bruce could've used a helping hand the first time around. Dick's upbringing had become somewhat of a victory, Jason's a spiral, Tim's an exercise in leaving well enough alone, and Damian? He hadn't even gotten Damian to drop his violent tendencies before he'd died, and then he came back, and Dick had picked the torch up.

It was just his paternal instincts, telling him that the children would benefit if he had a partner. There was nothing else to it. Maybe he should call Diana. The children could use a woman to look up to. That had been another mistake he'd made early around them. Trying to find someone who'd love him when they were so young. Women flittering in and out of the manor as they lost interest in him.

He couldn't recall the last time Bruce Wayne had had a date with someone. Maybe he should fix that. He couldn't leave the manor now, not with the children here, but he should fix that before rumors started circulating.

Opening his eyes to the familiar scenery of the batcave, Bruce let out a deep sigh. He felt calmer now than he had before. Call Diana. Set up a date with a socialite soon. Whatever he was feeling for Clark was a biological imperative, not any actual feelings. His children were michevious and liked Clark more now than they do as adults and teenagers.

Bruce stood up, and walked over to his clothes, in a pile on the floor, and found his phone there, shooting Diana a text about tomorrow. He walked back up the stairs, crawling out of the clock only to nearly trip over Titus on the floor.

"Titus. What are you doing up here?" he asked, chuckling a little as the great dane shot him an unimpressed look. Bruce looked again, and found silly string in his dark fur. "You poor beast. Did Jason do this to you?"

Bruce got rid of it carefully, and was licked in the face as a thanks. He made his way down to the sitting room to confiscate the offending toy. Seeing as he hadn't bought them any silly string, it was coming

from outside.

"Stephanie," Bruce called as he came back into the living room, only to find it empty, save for Alfred and Damian. Damian giggled when Titus came running to give his tiny master some of his own thanks, and climbed on top of the dog, much to Titus amusement.

"Forward!" Damian called in Farsi and Titus trotted out of the room. Bruce chuckled.

"Where did everyone else go?" he asked the butler, who was reading and drinking a cup of tea in a chair.

"I believe they relocated to a poorly furnished hallway to play before Miss Cassandra, Miss Barbara, and Miss Stephanie have to leave for patrol," he said, turning the page in his book. "Master Kent joined them."

"Ah. Titus!" he called, and the big black dog trotted back into the room, and now Damian was holding one of the foam swords in hand, looking too comfortable with it for Bruce's peace of mind. "Don't do that. He'll just fall and hurt himself. We don't want that, do we?"

Titus sank down to the floor, gently turning until Damian rolled off.

The toddler whined and tried to push Titus to get him to stand back up again, but Titus just rolled over. Damian's eyes widened, and he giggled a little, mumbling the Farsi equivalent of 'tummy', and petting his dog happily.

"Keep an eye-" Bruce cut himself off when he saw Alfred's slightly raised eyebrow. "Sorry, Alfred. He's just... Very small."

"As I have handled you as an adventurous toddler, I think I can manage Master Damian, Sir," Alfred said, tsking, adding under his breath "taking every chance to stick your little head where it shouldn't be. Hasn't changed much."

Bruce ignored him, and instead crouched down next to Damian, scratching Titus' behind the ear. Damian smiled up at him with his sharp little teeth, looking extremely pleased, and Bruce caught the sight of Talia in that victorious grin. The older Damian got, the less he looked like Talia, and more and more like him. He wondered if Damian noticed that, too.

Smiling back, he pressed a kiss to Damian's head, earning an odd look

from the toddler.

"**Why do that?**" Damian asked, tilting his head in confusion.

"**To show that you're precious to me, little prince,**" Bruce said, and Damian hummed, ignoring him in favor of his dog and his crayons. Felt sort of normal, honestly.

Scoffing to himself, Bruce got up, and took off for the hallways he knew were most sparsely furnished. The upper west wing was so rarely used, they'd covered all furniture with sheets. Cass knew that very well, and as Bruce approached the hallway, he could hear laughing and yelling. Peeking around the bend, he saw silly string adorning the walls, and heard Nerf-guns going off.

He stepped into the hallway, and was immediately blasted by Jason, running out from one of the rooms further down and sliding on his knees like a rockstar whilst shooting at him. That was definitely a move from the older Jason's repertoire.

Bruce gave him an indulgent smile as he noticed the 490 dollar Ray bans perched on Jason's nose. When he noticed he wasn't recieving any fire back, he pushed the glasses down, quirking an eyebrow.

"Oh. It's just you," Jason said, sounding disappointed, and that stabbed at Bruce's heart, which was entirely incomprehensible. It was a game.

"Who did you think you were shooting?"

"Stephy. She's got mad fucking aim, B. I think I'm in love," Jason said in a deadpan, and then quirked a grin with crooked teeth that made Bruce's lips involontarily twitch back.

"She's practically your sister when you get older," Bruce pointed out, holding his hand out. Jason took it without hesitation, getting back on his feet and picking up the foam bullets laying around Bruce.

"Oh. Gross. Dick says he has a girlfriend or boyfriend when he's older. Do I have a girlfriend?"

"I think that you have a boyfriend too, actually. I've been too busy to check it out," Bruce remarked as Jason reloaded his Nerf-gun, watched those teal-blue flicker over at him, and then down to the floor. The ten-year-old's fingers moved a little shakily over the plastic of the gun, and that was a nervous gesture he recognized. He was just about to open his mouth when Jason beat him to the punch.

"Oh. Would you... Would you like me less if I had a-a boyfriend?" His voice was kind of choked and silent, and Bruce placed his hand on Jason's shoulder. His eyes were still following the pattern on the carpet.

"No. I wouldn't. You're my son, Jason," Bruce hurried to say, because the two of them might clash like angry alley cats most of the time, but one of the things he and Jason have never, *ever* fought about is anyone's sexuality. His moral choices? Almost every day by now. But never this. "Having relationships and experiencing attraction to both genders is very normal."

"You sound like a boring book," Jason scoffed, but he sounded sort of relieved as he shook Bruce's hand off his shoulder.

"You mean a non-fiction book?"

"A boring one, that's for sure," Jason said, tossing him a quick grin over his shoulder before disappearing into the last room on the right and firing another round of darts.

Bruce followed the laughter and noise from inside, and walked in to find his children perched on various shoulders and furniture. Silly string littered the walls here too, and Bruce frowned at it.

"Alright, break it up, kids. Stephanie, hand over all cans of silly string," Bruce demanded. Stephanie gasped.

"Why do you gotta assume it's me?" she asked incredulously, where she was standing on top of the fireplace ledge, holding a can in her hand. Bruce stared at it until she pouted and tossed it to him.

"Good. Now get the darts before you lose all of them. You three. You need to clean up for patrol," he said, already grabbing the darts by his feet, watching Clark gently set Tim down on the floor again out of the corner of his eye. Dick had war paint underneath his eyes. How'd that even get there?

"Bruce?" came Cassandra's soft voice, and Bruce straightened, raising an eyebrow at her in response. A can of something appeared from behind her back, and Clark was visibly about to say something when Bruce was sprayed in the face with silly-string.

"Lighten up," she said, eyes glinting with humor. "Be sillier."

"Oh my god, Bruce," Clark exclaimed, choking on his tongue with

laughter. Bruce wiped his face, and pinned Cass with a look. She didn't falter with her glinting eyes. Instead he gave the same look to Dick, who had the decency to look a little bit ashamed, and then Bruce pinned Clark with a look that made his ears heat up.

"Patrol. *Now*," he said, holding his hand out for the can. Cassandra pursed her lips.

"Smile?" she asked, and Bruce pursed his lips in reply, holding his hand out further. Cassandra didn't budge. Bruce sighed, but offered her a bemused smile. She gave him the can, and was immediately sprayed in the face.

All the boys burst out laughing out of pure shock, and Cassandra's usually smooth, blank face cracked into a grin. Bruce tossed the can in the air once.

"I meant what I said. Patrol, girls. Gotham doesn't wait for anyone," he pointed out, and Babs snickered as she dragged Stephanie, who was gasping for breath, after her, looking like she was genuinely dying from this sudden show of Bruce's humor. Clark looked a little dazzled too, actually.

"Boys. It's Friday night. What does that mean?" he asked, turning to the rest of his children, and Clark.

"Movies!" Dick and Jason exclaimed, and Tim grabbed onto Bruce's sweatpants leg, looking up at him very seriously.

"Can we watch Moana?" he asked.

"Of course," Bruce said, even though he had no clue what that was. God, he hoped that was a kids' movie.

"Sick!" Jason said, punching the air.

"Where did you learn that?" Bruce asked, because that was not a young-Jason word or an old-Jason word, as he dashed past him, still with sunglasses and Nerf-gun in hand.

"Steph!" Jason called as he took off out of the room, with Dick hot on his heels. Tim raised his hands up, making the little noise that meant 'up', and Bruce grunted as he picked little Tim up.

"Did you change into the dress before you guys went off to play?" Bruce asked as he settled Tim on his hip. Clark followed him out of

the room and down the hall. Now that Bruce knew it was just the biological compulsion, he could dismiss Clark's hands and their slim fingers and the way his hair curled as useless information again.

"Uh-huh," Tim replied. The dress was white, with cherrys grouped together all over the place. It was sort of cute, really. He was wearing a blue sweater over it, and the white tights underneath, which had gained some dirty spots from when Tim had been sliding through some dust in this unused wing.

"It's very pretty. Do you like it?" Bruce asked.

"Yeah. Alfred is washing the flowery one. Stop by the toy-room. I want my cube," Tim relayed, and Clark snorted.

"What are we, your peasants?" Clark asked teasingly, and Tim leaned back over Bruce's arm to look at Clark upside-down.

"What are peasants?"

"Clark means it as a sort of slave laborer, which isn't the dictionary definition," Bruce explained, walking a bit faster. Clark caught up to him easily enough.

"Is Clark's defition right?" Tim asked.

"De-fin-i-tion, not defition. And in a sense, yes."

"Well then he's fine. Stephanie says things don't always have to follow the rules to be right," Tim said sensibly.

"Oh, she's lucky she's on patrol right now," Bruce said under his breath, and Clark snorted.

"That really depends on what rule it is, Tim," Clark said.

"No. We don't break rules," Bruce said firmly, glaring at Clark.

"Why don't we?" Tim asked, looking over at Clark, and then back at Bruce.

"Because that's wrong," Bruce said firmly.

"Who decides what rules are the rules you can break?" Tim asked, completely ignoring Bruce in favor of Clark.

"That also depends on what rule it is," Clark replied philosophically,

and Tim nodded gravely.

"Can I break rules?"

"No. Rules are there for a reason," Bruce said firmly, cutting Clark off by putting his hand over his mouth.

"*That's* against the rules! Stephanie told me so!" Tim exclaimed, pointing accusingly at Bruce. "And if you get your palm licked, that's your own damn fault."

"Language," Bruce said, but pulled his hand away from Clark's mouth, and walked into the toy-room to the left. He let Tim down on the floor. "Don't listen to everything Stephanie says. She's not always right."

"Yes she is!" Tim said happily, diving into one of the piles of things, looking for his cube.

After all day, the majority of the toys had been spread out all over the house, and Alfred had looked long-suffering, which had lead to a lecture about toys being put back where they belong after being done with them. When asked where the toys *should* go, Bruce had ordered a bunch of hampers and plastic boxes to keep everything in, but they were just standing in the entrance hall. Maybe he'd deal with that tomorrow, when Diana had come around.

Speaking of Diana. He checked his phone, only to find a confirming text about her coming over tomorrow, and let a breath out.

"Moana. Is that a kids movie?" he asked Clark, who was leaning against the doorway. He looked up, and smiled, and Bruce felt himself take an unnecessarily deep breath. Just a biological compulsion. *Just a biological compulsion.*

"Yes, you're safe. It's a kids movie about a girl who saves her island from evil," Clark relayed.

"You've seen it?" Bruce asked, raising a slightly judging eyebrow.

"I'm a reporter and a superhero. I've seen a lot of bad stuff. Sometimes I don't want to watch a super-dramatic action movie, but something nicer. Lois suggested Disney. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it," he smiled.

"Disney princesses. Really."

"Hey, we all need methods to cope. Just because mine aren't kicking doors down or doing rolls and flips doesn't mean they're any less effective," Clark said, putting his nose in the air. Bruce scoffed.

"You think those are my coping methods?"

"That, or, I guess, just not coping. I don't know. What *are* your coping methods, Bruce?"

"Tea and meditation, I suppose. We'll see how good this 'Moana' movie is before I add Disney princesses to my list," Bruce said sarcastically, and Clark grinned.

"Open your heart and your mind, and get ready to have your socks knocked off."

"Okay, we can go now," Tim said, appearing again with the cube and a stuffed animal in the shape of a lion.

"Who's your friend?" Clark asked, nodding towards the toy.

"You mean the lion?" Tim questioned. When Clark nodded, Tim looked down at the stuffed lion with big eyes. "I dunno. I found her lying over there in the everybody-pile, so I took her."

"Does she have a name?" Bruce inquired. Kids were amusing like that, liking to name things. Earlier today, Tim had named people in portraits in the hallways that they passed the most, sometimes silently saying hello to them as they walked by. Later, he'd named his Rubrik's cube Tonya, for some reason, for no other reason than to have a name to call it by.

"Haven't decided yet. Clark, do you think ghosts can get wet if they get rained on? Dick says they can't, but Jason says they can," Tim said, taking Clark's hand when he walked out of the room. Another thing kids had a tendency to do: ask ridiculous questions out of nowhere.

"I don't know," Clark replied, laughing a little. "That's a good question. I think... They can get wet. What about you?"

"Well I don't believe in ghosts, but I think that they wouldn't get wet when it rains on them, because they're ghosts, so you can put your hand through them if you wanna, except not if they're Scooby Doo ghosts, because then they're people dressed like ghosts, like when Broose puts on his costume and is Batman," Tim said, all in one breath, as he led Clark to the living room where the other three kids

were.

After some pillows and blankets were grabbed, Dick and Tim took one loveseat, Clark, Bruce, and Damian took the other, and Jason sat on the floor with his back against Bruce and Clark's couch.

Alfred provided them with some snacks, and they began to watch Moana at around seven. By seven forty-five, Clark got up and went to the bathroom. By then, Damian was entirely knocked out, and Bruce decided to take him up to his room, stopping outside of the toy-rooms in hesitation.

"Oh, older you would hate me for this," he said to the sleeping Damian, chuckling to himself as he found what he was looking for inside in the everybody-pile and procceeded to the bedroom. He redressed him in some comfortable pajamas and tucked him in on the bed.

"**Here you go, little prince,**" Bruce murmured, stroking Damian's baby fuzz and placing the plush bat within gripping range. Almost immediately, Damian's little fingers found the edge, and he clutched the bat tight. He considered taking a picture, but thought that Damian might break his phone if he ever found out.

Smiling to himself, he made his way back to the couch. All three of his remaining boys had taken over his and Clark's couch now.

"Scoot, boys," Bruce chuckled, making his boys giggle as he made his way to sit between them, getting half of Tim in his lap and Jason's head on his shoulder. Dick took his hand, for some reason, but Bruce didn't know why he found it so odd, so he let him keep it there.

That is, until he recieved a text from the comms, saying only the letter J, and Bruce was back on his feet before he'd really registered it.

"Where do you think you're going?" Dick asked, hands on his hips and sounding surprisingly stern.

"Out," Bruce said a little incredulously, freezing in place when he felt three pairs of eyes pinned to the back of his neck.

"Like, out in costume out?" Dick asked pointedly.

"Yes."

"Then I'm coming with you!" he declared.

"What? No!" Jason said. "I'm Bruce's Robin! I'm the one that gets to go with him."

"No, Broose told me I'm Robin!" Tim said, louder. "I'm Robin! I get to go!"

Immediately, all three began yelling at each other, and Jason went after Dick with fists before Bruce managed to separate all three, holding Dick to the side with one arm, Tim to the other side, and with Jason lightly pinned to the floor with a foot.

"Whoah, whoah! Who said anything about any of you going?" Bruce asked, and all three froze, looking at him strangely. "Dick, you're out of practice. Tim, you're too young. Jason, the body you're currently in has memories of being Robin, when you haven't actually been Robin yet. Neither of you can go."

"What? Why?" Tim asked, and he looked surprisingly betrayed as Bruce set them all down on the couch again, walking around the couch. Bruce rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a little antsy. He didn't want the girls going after the Joker alone, and the boys were delaying him.

"Like I just said. It's not safe. I won't be able to watch you all the time when I'm on patrol."

"We'll bring Clark! He's Superman! If we do something and you're too busy kicking ass, he can help us!" Dick said excitedly, leaning on the back of the couch with a grin like he'd just solved all the problems in the world.

"No. Clark is leaving Gotham tonight. I don't want him patrolling here. He's going home," Bruce said, maybe a little sharper than needed. He needed Clark out of the house to think straight again. He and Alfred could handle the kids on their own. He didn't need a partner, biological urges be damned. All three turned to lean on the back of the couch, protesting profusely, and Bruce held his hand up, silencing all of them. "I said *no*."

There was silence, and slowly, all hopeful looks turned to anger again, and Bruce met each and every one's look, convincing them he was right, and he might've managed to win, if only Clark had entered the room right then.

"I heard yelling. Are you guys okay?" he asked worriedly, pressing his glasses up on his nose. His children took one look at Clark, looked

over at Bruce, and then each other. Tim picked his stuffed lion up.

"Yes, Clark, we're- what are you doing?" Bruce asked as his children hopped off the couch, taking determined strides towards the reporter in the doorway.

"Hey, whoah, what's happening right now?" Clark asked, but nobody answered him, and he was just steadily pushed out of the living room and up the stairs.

"Dick..." Bruce said warningly, but Dick had a fierce look on his face, and was not stoppable. Internally, Bruce cursed as much as he was cherishing this little blast to the past. Thirteen-year-old Dick had had his moments of rebellion, and this was apparently going to be added to the long list of it.

"Guys, I just wanna-"

"Shut it, Clark," Jason grunted, and when even Tim tried to use his entire body weight to pull Clark towards the hall with the bedrooms, Clark began actually walking consciously, trying not to hurt any of the little kids pushing at him with surprising force.

"Boys, stop acting-" *Like children*, Bruce thought, cutting himself off, and wanted to kick something as he followed the three children and Clark to the bedrooms, trying to regain his patience. He was doing this for their own best, of course. He wasn't trying to actively be an asshole. Bruce was just concerned for their safety, which, of course, the children didn't give one rat's ass about!

"Come on, Clark!" Dick announced loudly, pulling Clark into his bedroom and giving Bruce a death-glare over his shoulder. "You can sleep with us."

"Clark is going *home*," Bruce said firmly, meeting Jason's challenging gaze seeing as he'd obviously lost Dick to rebellion already.

"No he's not!" Jason yelled, and Tim blew a raspberry at him before the bewildered and sheepish Clark was dragged into Jason's room, the door slammed tightly behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Super! Long! Chapter! because I cannot for the life of me restrain

myself.
Btw Tim naming things? I don't know if other kids did this, but I was an incredibly avid name-giver to inanimate objects, much to my mother's amusement. Maybe I was just a lil' weirdo.
Thank you for all the encouragement and niceness!!!! You are all the apples of my eye, the cat's pajamas, all of that jazz. I love you all and wish to bring you joy. Thank you thank you thank you for reading this.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred came out of the room, closing the door behind him quietly.

"Well? Are they reasonable yet?" Bruce aked impatiently.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but it seems like the young masters have decided quite firmly that you are their least favourite guardian," Alfred said in his usual monotone, but the twitch in his lip revealed that he found this quite amusing. Bruce rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

"What was I supposed to do, bring all three? The only one who might be able to handle himself would be Dick, and even then, it's going out on a limb." He rubbed his face with his hands. "This might surprisingly be my chance. You'll check on Damian, won't you? I think he'll be fine, but just in case. He's been having nightmares."

"Of course, Master Bruce. Do be careful with your stitches, hm?" Alfred said as Bruce took off for the cave. He didn't get a reply, and resigned himself to that.

Bruce hurried into the suit, into the batmobile, running through the checklist in his head, once saying an item out loud, and reeling when he didn't hear Damian's curt 'of course I have that, father. Stop pestering me about it'.

It had been a while since he'd gone out without a Robin, too, he realized. Damian's insistence and stubbornness made sure of it. Bruce shook the thought off and burned out of the cave with only one thing in mind: putting the Joker back in Arkham.

A few hours after Master Bruce had left, Alfred decided to check in on the boys. He trusted they hadn't gotten into too much trouble, seeing as they hadn't left Master Richard's room, and Master Kent was in there with them.

He knocked gently.

"Who is it?" came Jason's yell from inside.

"Alfred, Master Jason," he relayed, smiling a little privately to himself. He'd missed having the little chap in the house. Even though they were all a lot of work, he'd missed the sound of children running around, happy, in this large old house.

"Come in!" Dick called, and Alfred opened the door.

The rather large bed had been turned into a pillow fort of sorts, with covers turned into a barrier at the end of the bed and the last few minutes of Moana playing on the tv hidden in the closet. All the children and some toys were scattered around the bed, and that was something he'd missed too. The only person in this house he usually had to pick up after was an adult. Toys and stuffed animals were much preferred in comparison to grapple hooks and boots.

"Would the young masters and master Kent want some snacks?" Alfred asked from the doorway, and Dick popped out of the fort. Clark had helped tie a small rope that he wasn't sure where it'd come from between the two posts on the end of the bed, and helped hang the covers over it, so that they had their own little cave that they could hang in.

"Gummy bears please," Dick chirped, and Alfred gave a nod.

"Of course, Master Richard. Some pretzels for Master Jason?"

Jason's head appeared from the brightly colored canopy, not surprising Alfred in the least. Dick had always been the one to perch in high places, but Jason was a fan of smaller spaces. Between the ceiling and the canopy, there was maybe a foot or two of space, max, and he looked very pleased to be able to look down and see everyone under him. Alfred wasn't worried about his safety. Master Kent was here, after all.

"Hell yeah."

Just as Jason replied, Clark appeared out of the covers gathered in the mouth of the cover-cave, looking sheepish and ashamed of being a big man in a small bed fort.

"Alfred. Hi."

"Master Kent. Would you like a snack?" Alfred asked, his professionalism clear in that he didn't seem to be judging Clark at all for being a big man in a small bed fort.

"Oh, gosh, no, I-um. Thank you, but no," he quickly stuttered. "I think I'm just gonna go-"

"No," three voices said very firmly and loudly, and Clark sighed quietly, smiling a 'what can you do' smile at Alfred.

"He'll have soda," Tim said, peeking out from underneath the bed, and Alfred nodded.

"As you wish, Sir. And for you, Master Timothy?"

"...Pop rocks?" he said questioningly.

"Of course, young master." The blankets rustled inside the pillow fort, and Alfred stepped closer to look in a little bit. "Ah, Miss Cassandra. I didn't hear you come back in. Comfortable?" he asked kindly, and Cassandra nodded from where she was bundled up in a burrito of covers, Damian resting against her chest. "Is Master Damian staying here, or would you like for me to bring him back to the master bedroom?"

"Here," Cassandra said softly, stroking Damian's hair back gently. Alfred gave her a short nod.

"If you change your mind, I'm but a call away, miss." Cassandra nodded, but clutched Damian to her tighter instead of answering verbally. "Could I get you something less formal to wear, perhaps, Master Kent? You're not wearing sleep-over appropriate attire."

"Oh, um. You don't think Bruce will mind? He did say I should go ho-"

"No!" all children said simultaneously, and were shushed by Cassandra. Jason peeked over the canopy and mouthed 'sorry' at her. Dick held a hand over his mouth.

"That would be quite the resounding no, Master Kent. I shall fetch some clothing for you."

"Thank you, Alfred," Clark replied, blushing a little. Alfred gave a short nod, and disappeared out of the room again.

"Why do you wanna go home so bad? The manor is awesome," Dick

said from behind his hand as soon as Alfred was out of the room.

"I don't, really. It's just, I don't want to upset Bruce," Clark explained. "He was pretty clear about me going home."

"Bruce could do with someone telling him to fuck off once in a while," Jason said from the canopy, and Clark choked on a snort, earning him a sly smirk from Jason. "Don't'cha agree, Clark?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say it, guys, but I think he was right in not letting you go out tonight," he said, and held his hand up when there were silent, angry exclamations. "He was pretty mean about it! Yeah! But he was right. Like that bastard always is," Clark added with a half-laugh.

"I don't think Broose is always right. He's never right when he and Alfred are arguing," Tim said, appearing from underneath the bed and leaning his elbow against the end of the bed. "Maybe tatical stuff, but that's it."

"Tactical," Clark corrected, feeling a little surprised.

"Yeah, I agree," Dick said confidently. When he looked over at Cassandra, she smirked.

"Best part about being Batman's? You get to say 'no' to him," she said confidently.

"Exactly. Or fuck off. But he doesn't like that. 'Language!' he yells!" Jason said dramatically as Tim climbed onto the bed and leaned against Clark's side.

"What about saying 'heck'? That's fuck and hell at the same time but sounds less cuss-y," Tim said a little sleepily, and Dick gasped.

"Timmy! Who told you that?" he asked, completely scandalized. "Nevermind, it was Steph, wasn't it? You're seven! She shouldn't be saying that to you!"

Cassandra laughed silently, and everyone's eyes snapped to her immediately. Dick's lips turned up immediately, and Tim smiled back at her, and even Jason replied to that with a crooked grin.

"See? Cassie get's it," Jason said sweetly. The door opened again, and Alfred reappeared with snacks in hand, and a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt for Clark.

He went to the bathroom quickly to change. The sweatpants were a little short on him, but still comfortable and they smelled overwhelmingly like Bruce, which was, to Clark's lovesick mind, the best thing ever. He texted Lois saying he'd been invited to a sleep-over and wouldn't make their lunch date tomorrow, and recieved a 'suck his dick' back, which he read and then felt his face become as bright red as a tomato.

He sent 'screw you' back, and went back to join Bruce's kids in the bed fort, feeling no shame whatsoever as Tim climbed into his lap, giggling as he ate his pop rocks. Dick managed to coax Jason down from the canopy and trapped him under a blanket with him. Cassandra kept Damian close until Alfred peeked in at around two a.m., taking the toddler.

By then, everyone was asleep, and Alfred looked at the sleeping Clark with a knowing smile on his face. Tim was draped over Clark's whole torso, his hand touching Dick's. Cassandra's hand was buried in Jason's hair, and Dick had wrapped his free arm around Jason's shoulders.

Turning the lights and tv off, Alfred carried the almost-awake toddler and his new stuffed bat out of the room, murmuring "Now then, Master Damian, let's see about getting you out of that nappy."

Batman had shown up just in time to rescue Spoiler from an acid bath and essentially grab Joker by the collar, knock him out, and then procceed to drag him back to Arkham. Stephanie had yelled at him about being able to deal with it herself, but Barbara and Bruce just looked each other in the eyes and nodded.

Enough of Bruce's children had been hurt by that madman. Enough is enough.

"You did good," Batman said to Batgirl as they stood on a rooftop in the rain, and Babs' hand went up to her elbow in an unusual show of nervousness.

"Yeah," she said softly, but he could tell she was trembling a little. Barbara was practically fearless, but this was a weak spot. Then she took a deep breath, and her eyes glinted of steel, and Bruce was reminded that she was the original Batgirl once again. "I know I did."

"Take Crime Alley. Red Hood isn't there to run it now. Bring Black Bat."

"Actually, Black Bat went back to base. Said something about Moana?" Babs said distantly, readying her grapple. Bruce couldn't restrain the scoff, and Babs shot him a surprised look.

"Nothing. Go," he said, shooing her off, and Babs narrowed her eyes at him before firing and swinging away into the slums of Gotham.

He managed to stop a bank robbery and a few muggings as well as a rape, and decided to call it a night when he'd turned everyone in.

When Bruce got back to the cave, he changed his bandages on the stitches again, took a long, hot shower, and then went upstairs again, tired and sore and feeling absolutely fucking amazing.

However, Bruce spent the rest of the night alone in his bed, and found it surprisingly hard to sleep. After a few minutes of breathing exercises, he finally managed, but it wasn't as deep and long as he probably needed. The next morning, around ten, Bruce got up and made his way down to breakfast, only to remember that it was Saturday, which was the day when it was a 'fend for yourself' breakfast-situation.

Of course, that couldn't be now, when there were small children that had to be fed. Right?

Bruce walked by Dick's room and saw bowls and plates and glasses stacked on a tray outside. So the boys were definitely up and fed, at least. Maybe he should try to gauge how angry they were with him before setting them free in the manor to do as they wanted. Maybe he'd take them on a walk again.

He would've walked right in, except he felt a presence at his right, and when he turned to look, Clark was standing there, frowning.

"I wouldn't just barge in if I were you. They're still pretty peeved about not getting to go out last night," he said warningly.

"You're still here?" Bruce asked Clark incredulously, and then looked him over. "You're wearing my shirt."

"It's Saturday. I have Saturdays off," Clark said, crossing his impressive arms over his chest. Clark always wore loose shirts, but Bruce's shirt was just tight enough to show his abs and the triangle shape of his torso, and his biceps were huge. Clark's hair was sleep-ruffled, the soft locks messy, and the challenging look on his face was doing a good job at increasing Bruce's heart rate. Huh. "Besides, I wasn't allowed to

leave, and we had a sleepover. So yeah, I'm wearing your shirt. Problem?"

"No. Just worried about my good-quality shirts being ruined by sleeping in them," he said, forcing his mouth into a frown.

"What happened to you being a billionaire?" Clark challenged, a little smirk on his face. Bruce allowed himself a very minimal smile.

"Gosh, Clark, how do you think I became a billionaire? If I'm going to spend that much money on toys and a jungle gym, I've got to cut some costs somehwere, right?" Clark scoffed.

"Right. Well, I'm going to make coffee. You want some to revive you after your kids give you hell?"

"Tea, actually," Bruce said distantly. "And keep your coffee away from Tim. I don't remember when his coffee addiction started and I don't want it to be now."

"Concerning,"

"You should see him mid-case. Energy drinks, Mountain Dew, and coffee mixed in the same cup." Clark looked absolutely horrified.

"Bruce! That's so bad for him! Why don't you stop him?"

"He doesn't live with me anymore. Talk to your kid about it," Bruce tossed over his shoulder before opening the door and stepping inside. The drapes had been opened, and some sun was shining through, hitting the monstrosity that was their huge bed-pillow-fort.

"What do *you* want?" Jason asked a little acidly from inside the mouth of their bed-cave, and Bruce sighed. Definitely still angry, then.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked kindly as he walked closer. All three of them pointedly looked away from him. Cassandra watched on, bemused, from deeper in the bed-cave. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she smiled at him, shrugging a little. Alright then. "Can I explain myself, at least?"

Dick and Jason remained passive-aggressively not engaging, but Tim's head turned a little reluctantly.

"Tim... Remember how we said bad people made you small to hurt you? If you go out patrolling as Robin, this small and inexperienced,

what do you think will happen?" Bruce asked patiently. Tim seemed to consider that for a moment. The other two looked at him out of the corner of their eyes, looking suspicious.

"We'd get hurt," Tim said quietly after almost a full minute of silence. Bruce was patient, and watched as Jason's head turned to look at him too.

"Like the bad guys want," Jason reluctantly admitted.

"Exactly. I'm...sorry if I handled it in a bad way. I shouldn't have gotten mad. I was just... scared that you'd be hurt. Can you forgive me?" Bruce asked, reaching a hand out towards his kids. Finally, all three were looking at him.

They were silent, contemplating him, but Dick didn't look mad so much as disgruntled, and Jason was probably just holding a grudge to have a grudge to hold, and Tim had that 'maybe adults aren't so dumb all the time' look on his face. His chances were good.

"If we get to go outside," Dick said a little haughtily, and Bruce smiled a little despite himself.

"Deal," he said, and Tim immediately reached both hands up, and Bruce had picked him up before he'd even done the 'up' noise, feeling relieved to hold him in his arms again.

Maybe meeting the Joker and Stephanie's close call last night had unsettled him more than he'd originally thought.

"Was breakfast any good?" Bruce asked as the other two crawled out of the bed, and pulled Jason into his side, stroking his hair as Tim buried his face in his neck.

"Alfred let us have cereal!" Dick exclaimed happily, and buried his face in Bruce's stomach. Cassandra slowly crept out of the bed-fort and leaned against his Tim-free shoulder, wrapping an arm around Jason.

"That's nice," he murmured, taking a deep, calming breath.

Clark watched from the doorway as Bruce talked to his children, giving Cass' forehead a kiss and nudging a sleepy Tim with his chin. His big hands ruffled Dick's and then Jason's hair, and Clark felt his heart beat a little faster just from looking at him lovingly interact with his kids.

He wondered if maybe he should call Kon, but discarded the idea. If he ever tried to ruffle Kon's hair, Kon would probably ask if he'd come in contact with any alien space-ships or mysterious artifacts lately. Clark sighed to himself.

After Bruce got some tea and a sandwich shoved down his throat by Alfred, everyone put on more appropriate clothes and shoes, and procceded to stomp out into the damp backyard. The raincloud from last night were still looming, and Clark felt a little down just looking at them. He needed to feel the sun on his face again, just for a little while.

"How mad would you be if I-" Clark began, and cut himself off when Bruce rolled his eyes and shooed him off.

"I've been trying to get you off my property since yesterday. By all means, go," he said, and Clark laughed and zoomed up into the air, much to the amusement of the children, if their laughs were anything to go by.

Damian watched Clark disappear into the clouds, and looked up at Bruce. He was waddling along, but from his previous experience with Damian and walks, soon he'd get tired, but he wouldn't whine about it. He'd just walk on until he fell over and had trouble getting up again. First time he'd noticed, Bruce had felt a sudden murderous urge to go find Talia, except Damian needed him. His kids needed him, he reminded himself.

"**Where Cla' go**?" he asked.

"**The sun. He'll be back**," Bruce said, because he was almost ready to admit defeat by now. His kids wouldn't let Clark leave without giving him hell about it by now. Besides, Diana would want to meet him. He didn't want to earn the Amazon's wrath by sending Clark home before she'd had a chance to see him.

"**Why does he have to go?**" Damian asked, and his little lower lip wobbled. Bruce picked Damian up quickly, a little alarmed.

"**Just for a moment. He'll be back**," he soothed, rubbing Damian's back. Damian's little lip wobbled dangerously again, and Bruce added a small bounce in his step where he walked.

"Wan' Cla'," Damian said, in English for once, and very insistently, and

Bruce blinked, and decided it was time to test Clark's commitment to his kids.

"**Call for him. He'll come right back to you**," Bruce told Damian and his big wet eyes. Damian opened his mouth and closed it again quickly. "**Go on, little prince.**"

Damian considered it, and frowned, but then he got a determined look on his face.

"Cla'," he said, half-loudly, and Bruce slowed down, watching the sky. He could start to feel Damian's disappointment, and was just about to give Clark a shout himself, when there was a breakthrough in the clouds above them, and Clark came racing out. He slowed down just in time to not barrel into the ground, eyes wide.

"What's up? You guys okay?" he asked a little incredulously, turning to count heads. Tim, Jason, and Dick were stomping around in some puddles ahead of them, seemingly uncaring that Clark had returned so quickly.

"Damian just missed you," Bruce relayed, and Damian tipped his nose in the air.

"Didn't!" he said loudly, and Clark chuckled, eyes alight as he stole Damian from Bruce's arms.

"I missed you too, Damian," he said, giving Damian's cheek a loud, wet kiss. Damian pushed the reporters face away, but tipped his head up so that Clark could kiss his cheek again. Clark muffled his laugh and planted three or more kisses on Damian's cheeks before Damian giggled.

Bruce felt an incessant fluttering in his core when he watched Clark interact so easily with his most troublesome child, and blamed it on the biological needs rearing their ugly head again.

His lack of attention to his other children, however, was a mistake.

"What's that, Lassie? Little Timmy's fallen into the well?" Jason asked Titus theatrically and loudly. Bruce turned and could anticipate Jason's move before he'd even started, but he wasn't fast enough to get there before the accident.

"I did not!" Tim said indignantly, and was promptly pushed into a deep, muddy puddle.

"Help, Batman, he's drowning!" Jason called dramatically. "Oh, cruel world! A child in danger and no one to save them!"

"Jason," Bruce growled, and grabbed the back of Jason's shirt before he could run off.

"C'mon, B, golden opportunity! Puddle, Timbo, Titus! When was I ever gonna get the chance again?" Jason grinned, obviously unrepentat.

"Apologize," Bruce said firmly as he helped Tim up on his feet, still keeping one firm hand on Jason.

"My dress," Tim said dejectedly, his voice wobbling. Jason looked at Tim uncomfortably. "I liked this dress."

"It's just a- ow!" Jason shouted as Tim kicked Jason in the knee very hard.

"*Tim*," Bruce chided.

"He pushed me!" the usually so silent Tim yelled.

"He *kicked* me!" Jason said, louder.

"We don't hit people," Bruce said, and immediately regretted it when all three gave him a look like maybe he'd taken too many hits to the head.

"Yeah we do," Tim said indignantly. "We hit bad guys. Jason's being a bad guy."

"Am not! I'm just funny, is all, but you're such a little baby, you don't get it," Jason said, making his voice wobble dramatically. Tim's eyes narrowed dangerously, and Bruce was tempted to let them go at it until they'd settled it, but he knew Alfred would disapprove greatly.

He probably could've stopped the punch Tim threw, but he honestly didn't think Tim'd be able to pack as much force into it as he did, since Jason immediately toppled over, unable to take a breath.

"Jesus," Bruce hissed, and stopped Tim from going after him further.

"Oh my god, Bruce!" Clark said from maybe a yard behind him, and oh now it was *Bruce's* fault, wasn't it? Let's see him try to deal with the two of them. Oh, right! They'd tried that, and it had gotten Bruce stitches!

When Tim continued to struggle, Bruce simply tucked him under his arm, with his head turned so he would't be able to see Jason and get even angrier as he tended to him.

"Jason? Can you breathe?" Bruce asked when he heard Jason gasping for air, and cursed inwardly when Jason just continued to make choking noises, fear in his eyes. "You're okay, don't worry, chum, you just got the wind knocked out of you. Arms up, try to take a deep breath. C'mon, there you go."

After maybe a minute, Jason managed a whole, gasping breath, and promptly broke down in tears. Tim had stopped struggling now, and Bruce looked over his shoulder.

"Are you going to behave if I set you down?" he asked Tim very firmly. Tim nodded dejectedly. Bruce set him down on his feet and helped Jason rise. "C'mon, there's a good chum. Up and at 'em."

He wrapped his arms around both of them, sighing into Tim's hair. They both seemed to have forgotten about their little spat, Jason because of air-displacement and Tim because of his minutes in upside-down time out.

"Now, apologize. Both of you," Bruce said sternly as he pulled back, making the boys face each other. Neither looked at the other. "This is not up for debate!" he added when Tim got an angry look on his face.

"I'm sorry I hit you," Tim grumbled.

"I'm sorry I pushed you," Jason mumbled back, snuffling a little as he held his hand out. "Honest, I was just making a joke."

"I'll punch you again," Tim said calmly.

"No punching," Bruce said firmly. "Promise you won't do it again. Both of you."

"I promise," they said in unison, but Bruce was ninety percent sure the two of them would be fighting by the end of the day. Worth a try, at least.

"Good," he said. Jason, you're walking with Clark and Damian. Tim, with me and Dick."

"But-" Jason protested, and was silenced with a look. He pouted. "Fine!"

Bruce nudged Jason back and took Tim's hand in his, Dick hooking his arm through Bruce's.

They walked around a bit more outside, Damian finally telling Clark to put him back down but still grabbing onto his legs occasionally, like he was suspicous that Clark would take off at any moment.

Dick managed to get himself muddy by doing a cartwheel in the wet grass and managing two coincidental flips before finally landing on his ass. Jason got away from Clark and wrestled him, getting them both soaked and dirty. By then, however Clark had seen Alfred coming out of the Manor to call them in for tea.

"Oh my," Alfred said when they entered the house, with that specific tone Bruce associated with early childhood when he managed to make a mess most of his time awake. "I do believe it's bath-time. No tea until you're all cleaned up."

"It's not that bad," Jason said, who probably had mud in his mouth by now.

"Bath time," Bruce agreed, shooing them off towards the bedrooms with their attatched bathrooms.

Dick was old enough to take his own showers, and Jason complained that he was too, but Tim was still pretty small, and Bruce wasn't sure he could put Tim in the shower without the tiny boy slipping and breaking something, or without him needing help getting rid of all the mud he too had aquired. So bath time it was.

Damian found it all moderately amusing, since the tub was big enough for him to swim in, but Tim was a little pouty that he had to share bath with Damian.

"I'm not going in!" he said very firmly when Bruce tried to place Tim in the tub. Damian was already making bubbles in the water with his mouth, giggling and managing to inhale the water when he opened his mouth to do so. It was adorably child-like of him, a side Bruce wished he'd been there for in the first place.

"You want to be clean for Diana later, right?" Bruce cajoled. "Don't wanna be dirty when she comes over, do you? I bet Alfred's washed that other dress by now."

Tim looked like that was a good prospect, and was very tempted, but then he stomped his little foot and gave Bruce a challenging look.

"I'm not going in if you're not going with me!" he declared. Bruce took one look at his little seven-year-old and his determined pout and gave up. He tugged his shirt and pants off without a fuss, plopping Tim in the huge tub and joining the two of them not a moment later.

He let them play around for a while before he added bubbles, which Damian didn't recognize and so obviously immediately tried to eat.

"**That didn't taste too good, did it?**" Bruce said sympathetically when Damian blew raspberries with his tongue to get rid of the taste, shaking his head.

Bruce styled Tim's hair into a mohawk with the flower-scented child's shampoo he didn't recall purchasing, which both boys found equally amusing. Damian tried to copy it, but didn't quite manage, so Tim helped him, and then the two of them shouted until they got to do it on him too. Their truce lasted for about that long.

"Broose!" Tim whined from the other side of the tub when Damian began trying to wail on him with a rubber duck.

"Damian," Bruce said impatiently, and tugged the duck from his little chubby fingers, not enjoying Damian's evil-looking grin as he placed him in his lap to keep him away from Tim.

"Bruce?" Clark called.

"In here," Bruce said distantly, giving the duck to Tim, only to have to confiscate it when he tried to hit Damian with it. "What did I say about hitting?"

"We do it all the time!" Tim complained just as Clark looked into the bathroom, and snorted loudly and unattractively, slapping a hand to his mouth.

"Yes, Clark?"

"Yeah, Bruce, I-" He cut himself off when another soundless laugh took over his body.

"Is there something amusing about this?" Bruce asked Clark calmly, who was obviously not rolling around on the floor laughing out of sheer willpower. He shoved his fist against his teeth as he tried to reel it in, his cheeks flushing.

"Not-not at all. Wow, that's-" Clark took a deep breath, mirth still in

his eyes and grinning broadly. "That is one big tub."

"It's supposed to fit three full-grown people comfortably. It has to be a moderately large tub for that."

"Fair enough. Just wanted to let you know that Dick and Jason are in the tea room already. But, I'm, uh, gonna leave you boys and your fancy hair here," he said. Tim gave Bruce a glittering look. Bruce hid his smile behind reaching for some conditioner.

"Clark, come see my rubber ducky," Tim said innocently, and Clark, having learned nothing from spending a near solid three days with the young children, came forward with a patient 'I'll amuse you' look on his face. He crouched by the tub and leaned against the its edge, looking at the duck inspeculatively.

"That's a very nice du-"

Bruce dunked Clark's head in the water without hesitation, registering just how soft those curls were before they were underwater. Clark dove back up quickly, and blinked the water out of his face with a gobsmacked look, when Damian swam over to him, grabbing some foam from the tub and making the hair right where the spitcurl would be stand up.

"**There**," he said decisively, leaning back to look at his work with a happy smirk. Bruce chuckled as Clark burst out laughing, shaking his head like a dog, with Damian squealing as he was splashed with it.

"C'mere you little monster," Clark said jokingly, hauling Damian halfway out of the tub to give his cheek a loud kiss as Damian screeched happily.

When Clark let him go, the toddler giggled as he swam back over to Bruce, who cleared his throat and dunked his head underwater. When he resurfaced, he found Clark watching him.

"Go dry off. We'll be out soon," Bruce said, his voice more silent than usual, a little softer, and Clark nodded, rising back to his feet before grabbing a towel and disappearing out of the bathroom. "Alright, boys, you heard the man. You want Jase and Dick to finish all the cookies before you get there?"

"No!" Damian roared, and disappeared under water. Bruce helped gently rinse the shampoo-mohawk from Tim's hair, before giving both of them some conditioner and then rinsing that too.

Plucking them both out of the tub and trapping them in towels, he dried himself off quickly, seeing Damian making a break for the door in all his naked glory.

"Oh boy," he said to himself before setting after the laughing toddler, hearing Tim laugh from behind him and feeling oddly comfortable that this was his life for now.

Chapter End Notes

> Pretty dang long, because I have a bunch of tests coming up, so I don't know when I'll be able to update!! Not on hiatus or anything, just me having to focus on school stuff probably. I'll try my best to update as often as I can, but, y'know, just giving you a heads up!
> Thank you for your continued support and sweetness in the comments!!! Really makes me wanna keep writing!!! You're all amazing and wonderful!!! <3<3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finally, everyone was clean, dry, dressed, and sitting in the tea room, and Bruce could relax. Cassandra had decided to join them for tea, and was sitting with Damian on the floor, feeding him little cookie crumbs.

He was relaxing in a chair a bit separate from the others, trying to find some silence. It was nice, sure, to have his kids this young, but it was also very loud, and for a man used to solitude and there being maybe three people and a dog in the house at a time, it was a little annoying.

Bruce was definitely feeling a little more relaxed now, at least. Or, he was, until his phone began ringing, an unknown number. That could be any number of people, but the ones with access to his personal phone that he didn't recognize off the top of his head? Only one.

"Hello, beloved," came Talia's smooth, lovely voice from the other side when he picked up, and Bruce saw Clark's head whip around on the other side of the room.

"Hello Talia," he replied.

"I heard our son has been turned into an infant on your watch."

"Do you want pictures?" Bruce asked, because he was *tired*. Talia had a game planned out, undoubtedly, enjoying seeing him squirm. She'd noticed their situation, been amused and probably come up with an elaborate scheme where she wanted him to trip up and either die, come back to her, or get seriously maimed. And Bruce was tired. He waved off Clark's worried frown, and the other man turned back to Bruce's kids hesitantly, probably still listening in.

"What?" Talia asked, sounding mildly surprised.

"He's really cute. He makes the same face you do when you're displeased. He's got your nose now," Bruce relayed. He wondered how, in another life, they would have ever managed to parent Damian into

a half-way decent person. Would they be together still? Talia made Damian when Bruce slipped out from under her control. Maybe Damian would never have existed in that life.

Talia was silent for a suspicious amount of time. Rearranging, re-scheming. He liked that sound.

"I also hear you're keeping Superman close. Scared, or horny?" Talia asked, and now the acid crept into her tone. Clark was obviously straining not to listen on the other side of the room, but he managed to get some of tea in the wrong pipe, because he coughed, earning surprised glances from Dick and a hard slap on the back from Jason. Tim, however, looked over at Bruce and narrowed his eyes.

"How many pictures do you want? I'll have Alfred send some. Which safehouse are you in now? Or maybe a five-star hotel? San-Diego? Tokyo? You always liked Ontario."

"I know what he looks like at that age. And I know his temper. That, he has certainly gotten from you, beloved. Do try not to fuck another man with our son in the room," Talia said, in typical I-heard-exactly-what-you-said-but-it-doesn't-matter-so-I'm-gonna-ignore-it Talia fashion.

"Miss me that much?" he asked, and she sighed a little wistfully.

"Of course. Do you miss me?"

"I do," Bruce admitted. Talia was one of the few people in this world he had once trusted wholeheartedly, and in that time, she'd managed to worm herself into nearly every nook and cranny he had. Talia hummed delightedly. Bruce wondered to himself what she was doing right now.

He did miss her, on some level. He would always miss her, a little. He could hate her as much as he wanted, and be angry, but there were still days where he ached for being as close with someone as he had been with her. Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"If you had plans to try and take over the world in the next two to three weeks, could you hold them? When I leave the house, our son is left unprotected, and you know I have to stop you."

Rule number one with Talia. Don't talk about the other kids unless absolutely necessary. The only one she really cared about other than Damian was Jason, and she despised Tim. Dick was... Well, she'd been

kicked in the face by him more than once. She wasn't very fond of him either. Don't bring attention to them, don't remind her that there are other weak spots, don't make her consider hurting them.

"A cease-fire?" Talia asked incredulously, and there was the sound of nails clicking on a smooth stone-surface. "You must really be worried. I agree on one condition: when our son is restored, you come to dinner with me."

Bruce scoffed.

"Really? That's your only condition? A dinner."

"Yes, beloved. Like the good old days," Talia purred.

"You really do miss me."

"Would I lie to you?" Bruce raised an eyebrow. Talia amended. "About that, at least?" Bruce considered it. When Damian was back to normal, so were the other boys. He could probably leave Gotham to them for the night.

"In Gotham," he said.

"Deal," Talia said, way too easily. He'd have to remember that when their dinner went down. "If our son is harmed by Superman, he will perish. And then you too will perish."

"I'll be sure to give Damian your love," Bruce said, and Talia sighed.

"Goodbye beloved. Remember our deal and honor it."

"Goodbye Talia."

"Who's Talia?" Tim asked from somewhere around Bruce's elbow, and looked down at Tim, sitting on the floor, perfectly serious with his little teacup in hand. He'd barely noticed Tim's presence, which was a little alarming.

"An aquaintance," Bruce replied, and Tim's eyebrows furrowed.

"No. You're lying. Why does Talia care about Damian?" he asked suspiciously. Damn Tim's good ears. Bruce sighed a little as Tim got up and handed him his teacup, and crawled into his lap before reclaiming his cup. He looked up at Bruce with those huge eyes, and Bruce picked his own cup back up.

"She's Damian's mother, is why," he replied.

"Oh. Is she scared?" Bruce blinked. Talia? Scared? It'd been a while since he'd even considered that.

"Why would she be?"

"Because people turned us small to hurt us. Damian's the smallest out of all of us," Tim pointed out, nodding over at the toddler, now sitting in Clark's lap in his little jumpsuit with black and blue stripes. Cassandra was holding onto his foot, for some reason, but Damian didn't seem bothered, pladdering on in Farsi to Clark about the book of farm animals he had.

"No, she's not scared."

"Are you?" Tim asked, with that earnest expression and tone all children had. Very honest creatures, children.

"No. I can defend you, as long as we stay in the manor."

"Okay. Do you love Damian's mom?" Tim asked, and now he looked a little worried. Bruce blinked.

"Why would you ask that, Tim?"

"Well 'cos moms and dads love each other, but she doesn't live here, and Dick says he has a boyfriend when he's older, and when I asked what boyfriends do he says that they love each other and make each other happy and kiss, and if you love Damian's mom that means you can't love Clark, and if you don't love Clark, he can't live here and I want him to live here," Tim said, and he actually looked tearful by the end of his tirade. Bruce had trouble with kids and their quickly shifting emotions too, obviously, and he felt mildly panicked as he stared at Tim, who stared back, lower lip wobbling.

"Okay, first of all, Tim..." Bruce sighed, thinking through how he was gonna try and explain this to him, "my relationship with Damian's mother is a little... complicated."

"That's just what-"

"-grown ups say when they don't want to talk about something, yes, Tim, I know," Bruce said patiently, chuckling to himself. "I don't think you'd understand our relationship, is all. It's very tricky, and I don't really understand it all the time either."

"Oh," Tim said, eyes wide. "Okay."

"Right. Yes, and I don't get why all three of you seem so insistent on thinking Clark and I are in love."

"'Cos you are," Tim said, in his adults-are-dumb tone.

"No, we're not."

"'Course you are. Alfred says you just need a nudge and then you'll hop in the sack. I don't know what sack he's talking about, but it better be big, 'cos you and Clark are really tall," Tim said very seriously. Alfred? *Oh*. Who could text and wanted Clark in the house? Who brought Clark his clothes?

Bruce found he'd groaned out loud before he'd really registered it.

"Alfred doesn't know what he's talking about," Bruce said, gently helping Tim out of his lap. "Don't worry about Talia, Tim. She won't hurt us. I won't let her."

"Okay," Tim said as Bruce herded him over to the others, and then excused himself to make a dignified angry dash towards the kitchen.

There Alfred was, putting groceries in the fridge.

"Ah, Master Bruce. Are they out of biscuits yet?" Alfred asked with mirth.

"Are you trying to set me up?" Bruce asked, astonished. Alfred blinked.

"Me? Why, Master Bruce, I can't believe you'd accuse me of such a thing. I will have you know that I have during my service to this family never done-"

"Oh, you *are*! You're the one who's asked Clark here for dinner practically every day since this started. Why?" he demanded, and Alfred closed the door to the fridge, his almost-smile turning into an almost-frown.

"You're a lonely man, Master Bruce," Alfred sighed. "Stoic does not have to mean lonely, but for you it does."

"You sent the text to Clark, inviting him for dinner," he said, and Alfred pursed his lips.

"Frankly, Mister Wayne, someone has to make a move, and neither of

you seem inclined to. Sir."

"I can't believe this!"

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" Alfred asked a little exasperatedly.

"What?"

"Have you enjoyed yourself? You last saw Master Kent two whole weeks before this mess began. I am concerned that the only person to notice your death if I'm gone would be the thugs in Gotham," Alfred said tartly, and Bruce sputtered.

"I'm enjoying spending time with my children."

"Yes, and Master Kent's presence has nothing at all to do with it, does it?"

"It *doesn't*."

"Of course not. That would be a ludicrous thought," Alfred said in a deadpan. "Then how come he's still here? You know very well that you could make him leave if you really wanted to."

"The kids like him. Won't let him leave without giving me hell about it," Bruce pointed out, and Alfred hummed, going back to putting the groceries into their respective compartments.

"Miss Prince should be here any moment. I hope you're all presentable."

"Stop the attempts at match-making, Alfred. It doesn't suit you." The doorbell rang, and Alfred raised an eyebrow at him, just like he used to when Bruce was a little boy and was being particularly rowdy and difficult.

"Your guest is here, Master Bruce. Would you be so kind as to let her in?"

"Bruce!" Diana smiled as she swept into the room, embracing him. Bruce grunted as she squeezed a little too hard, and then let him go, only to catch his cheek in one hand.

"Diana," he stated. "Glad you could come over. The boys need to be reminded there aren't only men in the world." She snorted.

"I'm sure. Aren't your daughters around, though?"

"I only have one daughter."

"Really? That surprises me. You're not one to underestimate women. Or, shouldn't be, at the very least," she said, and there was a dangerous, warning glint in her eye.

"I'm the last person in the world to underestimate women, believe me, Diana," Bruce said, allowing some anger to slip into his voice. She narrowed her eyes at him, but then let it go as there was the sound of childish laughter coming from upstairs. "I assume you're staying for dinner?"

"If you'll have me," Diana said graciously, and Bruce held his hands out for her jacket, before tucking it away. She was already half-way up the stairs when he came back out of the hallway closet, and he had to take two steps at a time to catch up with her.

Diana was almost an inch taller than him, which Jason had always found amusing for some reason. As if the daughter of a god would be short. Kal, however, was just about the same height as him. That was always what people remarked on whenever they were trying to get the scoop on the Justice League: Diana gained another inch or two when she wore her boots, and everyone always said 'wow you're tall'. In the beginning, she found it amusing, but nowadays, she was bored of it.

"How long have they been young again?" she asked as they walked.

"Around four days," he relayed.

"And how long has Clark been staying with you?"

"Four days." Diana scoffed.

"Well, I see why. He misses you. You're bad at reaching out, Bruce."

"Am not."

"Now you're being childish. Are your children rubbing off on you?" she asked, mirth in her eyes.

"How rude of you to insult the one who's going to be feeding you," Bruce said, and Diana almost casually flicked a piece of glowing lasso around his wrist and tugged.

"Is that really what you think of me? Rude?" she asked, an interested

look on her face.

"I admire your skills as a warrior and value you as a friend," he admitted reluctantly. Bruce definitely could have resisted more, but Alfred was always nagging him to give out more compliments and keep his allies. She smiled sweetly at him as he tried to tug the lasso off.

"That's what I thought," she said, sounding very pleased. "Now that I have you on the hook, how are you doing?"

Bruce struggled a little against the bond, but the lasso was quite strong.

"The children are fine, and Alfred seems to enjoy having to clean up the toys in the manor," Bruce said without breaking a sweat, and Diana narrowed her eyes at him.

"I hate it when you do that," she said, and Bruce scoffed.

"The truth is the truth. Lasso wants truth. Speaking of, lasso. Off." She regarded him with a disappointed look, but snapped it back.

"It's the only way to get an honest answer out of you sometimes," she said defensively when he gave her an annoyed look. "Besides, you never say that you like me."

"Like is the wrong word," he said reluctantly. Diana laughed her explosive laughter.

"Oh, Bruce," she crooned. "Sometimes I wonder at the world of man and your reluctance to feel love."

"Well it's started wars. After that, I'm a bit wary of it," Bruce relayed. Diana tsked.

"We're not here to have another theological discussion. I'm here for the children."

"Of course. They're excited to see you. However, they don't remember a lot from their older years. It's very sporadic, all of it, but magic is like that."

"I disagree," Diana said distantly as they heard the pitter-patter of feet on the carpet. "Magic has patterns, just patterns you don't notice until they're staring you in the face and you're reversing things."

Just as Bruce was about to reply to that, Damian came running around the corner, surprisingly fast for a child his age. He ran right past them, and Clark appeared around the bend, scowling.

"Damian," Clark said warningly, but since he wasn't putting any real authority into it, and toddlers had a bad grasp on it anyways, it wasn't doing any good. Bruce was just about to take action and stop his small child from running right down the stairs and getting a concussion when he saw a flash of golden light glint in Diana's hand.

"Come back, little one," she said, honestly pulling her Lasso of Truth out of it's assigned spot and tossing it over Damian, immediately ensnaring him and making him stop short.

"Did you seriously just lasso my child?" Bruce asked Diana sort of incredulously, who had a sheepish look on her face as she hauled Damian back in carefully, seeing as he was now sitting on his bum, tugging at his restraints.

"It is much easier now that he is much smaller," she pointed out as Damian stopped at her feet, looking up at her in confusion. "When he's older he struggles so much."

"Have you tried to lasso my child other times than this?" Bruce asked, even more incredulously, turning to look at Clark. Clark always managed to give things away. Clark looked as surpised as Damian did.

"He's very slippery then. Now, just like a little calf," she beamed at the amazed Damian at her feet.

"**You're strong**," he said to Diana, the first words he'd directed at anyone but Dick, Bruce, and Clark.

"**You're very fast, little warrior**," Diana countered in Farsi, and Damian's eyes grew even bigger. He tugged on the lasso again, looking down. "Where are the other ones? I never did get to meet Jason when he was this young, did I?"

"No, but he did admire you very much. Still has Wonder Woman shirts as an adult."

"Yes, your children all seem to like other superheroes much more than you," she said a little distantly as she tilted her head at a doorway down the hall, which Tim was hiding behind. When she saw Bruce looking, she smiled.

"Diana!" Clark grinned as he came over to them, kissing Diana on the cheek. She did the same gesture of cupping his face, but Clark just smiled at her. "How's Paris?"

"Warm. Lovely," she relayed, smiling right back. "How's Gotham?"

"Gloomy. Went to see the sun earlier today, though, so I'm energized. Need it when I'm running after these little monsters," Clark said, poking Damian with a toe and a soft, affectionate grin. The toddler was now trapped between all the legs of the adults, but was too busy doing the much loved arms-up-slip-out thing all toddlers knew how to do to try to get away from the lasso. "Isn't that right, Damian?"

"**Do it again**," Damian said, a little excitedly, to Diana, who smiled and tugged on the lasso to make it let him go.

"Don't," Bruce said, but Diana gave Damian a hand up and set him off running, nearly effortlessly tossing the lasso after him and capturing him again. "I thought I said don't."

"He likes it," she protested. Maybe bringing Diana over in this time of calm crisis wasn't his best plan, but he'd make it work. He needed her away from Damian, is all.

"Not something I want him to take with him back to his eleven-year-old self, thank you very much," Bruce said as Damian again was deposited on the floor in front of him.

"Not a very appropriate game," Clark agreed.

"Alright, *dads*," Diana said slyly, and turned around to face the doorway where Tim was standing.

Clark sputtered, and Bruce looked down at Damian, giggling quietly to himself.

"Diana-" Clark began, but half of Tim had appeared in the doorway, gaze on Diana and looking gobsmacked and blushing.

"Timothy! What a gorgeous dress," Diana said, crouching down from her good six feet two off the ground to get to Bruce's tiny child. Tim practically had tears in his eyes from sheer amazement as she coaxed him out of the doorway.

"Jason pushed me into a puddle and ruined my other one," he relayed, and his voice trembled a little this time around too.

"That wasn't kind of him," Diana said, immediately sweeping Tim off his feet and up onto her hip. "Do you still know how to battle in this smaller form?"

"Yes, but Bruce won't let me," Tim said petulantly.

"Well, we can kick Jason's butt later for your dress then. Together," Diana offered.

"No one's kicking anyone's butt!" Bruce called after them, and only heard Diana's electrifying laughter in response. He grumbled to himself as he looked down at Damian, happily chewing on Diana's lasso. "Oh, no, Dami, **spit that out. You don't know how many sweaty crooks that's been around**."

Dick was thrilled to meet Diana, blushing almost constantly around her, and Jason wasn't much better. He was barely able to talk in her direction until Clark helpfully mentioned that Jason, too, had a lasso. Diana was thrilled and pulled out her own tiara to match his, and then taught him how to lasso Damian, until Bruce put a stop to that and pointed out they had half of a room filled with just stuffed animals they could lasso instead of his younger brother.

"They don't move!" Jason complained, and Clark laughed as Bruce rescued the giggling Damian from being lassoed again.

"Damian's just about due for nap-time," he pointed out.

"No!" Damian shouted.

"I can take him," Clark offered, and Bruce considered it, looking at Clark's outstretched hands.

"I got him," Bruce assured, and was whacked in the chest by Damian.

"Ass!" he yelled at him, and Bruce sighed, pressed Damian's head to his chest gently, and began swaying just a little bit. Heart-beats were reassuring to small children, and Damian was no exception. It took but a moment before he was relaxing against him.

"Would you hand me his bat?" Bruce asked Clark softly, and Clark placed Damian's bat in the toddler's arms, smoothing a hand over his soft baby hair.

Diana and the other children watched from across the room as Bruce said something that made Clark smile, and she scoffed.

"Those fools," she sighed to herself, and Dick nodded.

"Yeah, they should totally be a couple, but they don't seem to get it! Are all adults this stupid about love?" he asked her. Diana shrugged.

"Men seem to be. Women, I've found, are much more receptive to it," she said thoughtfully, and then smiled down at Dick. "You, though. You are very good at loving people. It's a quality of yours I admire."

"You admire *me*?" Dick said a little incredulously, and the blush immediately rose to his cheeks.

"I definitely admire that about you."

"What about me? Am I good at loving when I grow up?" Jason asked, eyes wide. Diana's eyes turned a little sad.

"You're learning," she promised. "You were very hurt, Jason. You're still recovering, but you're learning. I'm proud of you for it." Jason blushed too when she nudged his chin with a knuckle. Tim picked up his rubriks cube and began fiddling with it. "You're not going to ask me about your older self, Tim?"

Tim looked up, eyes a little wide.

"Well Broose said I was Robin and now I'm Red Robin. I like that about older me. I think that's enough," he said philosophically. Diana laughed, startling the two men in the corner hovering over Damian.

"You're entirely right, Tim. All that matters is what you feel about yourself. Remember that," she said, just as Bruce exited the room with the sleepily mumbling Damian.

"What're you guys talking about?" Clark asked as he came over, smiling at them.

"Love," Diana said, raising an eyebrow at him. Clark cleared his throat and leaned down, grabbing one of Jason's nerf guns. He shot three shots as quick as he could and Diana, automatically, shielded herself with her bare forearms.

"Whoah!" all three boys said in unison, eyes wide.

"How cowardly," Diana said, but she looked amused.

"Those are some killer reflexes, lady!" Jason exclaimed. "Clark, do it again!"

Clark shot another nerfdart at Diana, who swatted it off and got up, grinning.

"Bring me a gun such as this one and we'll have an equal battle," she challenged.

"Nerf-battle!" Jason cried, and Tim and Dick scrambled for the ammo and their own guns. Clark handed Diana one, and was immediately shot in the throat.

"Ow!" he exclaimed, even though it didn't hurt him. Mostly just his feelings. Diana grinned at him.

"Fair is fair, Kal."

"Tim and Clark versus me, Dick and Diana!" Jason said from the entrance, where he was loaded up with a belt of ammo across his chest, wearing a headband that was originally Tim's.

"Why?" Tim asked from the top of one pile of toys where he was loading a gun about as big as he was.

"Cuz I say so!" Jason said loudly.

"Not fair, Clark isn't good!" Tim called.

"Hey!" Clark said, a little hurt. Tim looked over at him and shrugged.

"Fine, Tim and Diana, me, Dick and Clark!" Jason said flippantly.

"Tim? Butt-kicking time," Diana said very calmly. Tim looked confused for a moment before he remembered her previous promise, and he grinned evilly at Jason.

"I change my mind!" Jason yelled, eyes wide when he saw the look on Tim's face.

"No take-backsies!" Tim sing-songed, and aimed for him. Jason ducked behind the door when Tim fired a round of darts at him.

"Dick, rescue me!" he yelled, and Dick shot at Diana before running out of the room after his brother, laughing his ass off. Diana shot Clark in the ass and then picked Tim up before taking off running out of the room.

"You're an actual child!" Clark called after her, but he was laughing, and he was quick to follow behind all of them.

Chapter End Notes

Wow!!! I actually managed an update!!! so stressed though, so I hope this doesn't come out too bad... Your comments are so uplifting and make me feel so happy and I'm so glad I can bring all of you joy too!!! Thank you all so much for reading this and being the best readers anyone could ask for!!!
Also Diana is the best leather-wearing fun aunt anyone could ever ask for and no one can convince me otherwise.
<3<3

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Diana was an avid story-teller, and that night's dinner was one of the quietest ones Bruce had ever had with his family. Diana spoke of such spectacular tales that all children where silent, even Damian. Once, they were all so enraptured, and Bruce looked over at Clark, ready to share an amused look with him, when instead he found the reporter just as enraptured with Diana's story.

He took the moment to just look, for a second, and analyze. The lights were dimmed, and the late-afternoon sun was shining in through the window, hitting his back. It made him glow all the more. The concentrated look on his face, the slight pout of his lips, intensity of his look.

Alfred trying to set them up was obviously a sign that he hadn't had a girl around here in a while. He'd been too focused on Batman to remember Brucie Wayne. Both aspects of his personality needed attention. Maybe he'd set up a gala, or have a rich friend of Brucie's do it. He was too old to be seen in night clubs now. At least that's what his kids tell him.

After dinner, Diana hugged each child, kissing Tim's cheek and ruffling Jason and Dick's hair. Damian was allowed to tug on her lasso whilst she hugged Clark goodbye. She was about to hug Bruce too, but he was prepared this time, and steeled himself.

"Right. I'm sorry. I forget your bones aren't as unbreakable as mine," Diana said apologetically, and held her hand out. Bruce had a good idea, and cleared his throat.

"No, it's alright. I think you managed to pop my back last time. Very helpful. I'm getting old," he pointed out, and Diana laughed, and embraced him, giving his cheek a kiss. Good.

The kids stopped him from closing the door, and he was just about to ask why when Diana put on her leather jacket and hopped off the ground, taking off into the sky. That was well met with the little crowd of kids he had, and Tim tugged on his pants, going 'Broose

look!'.

"Yes, quite... impressive," he allowed.

"Kickass!" Jason exclaimed.

"So awesome," Dick grinned.

"Looney Tunes start in four minutes, young sirs," Alfred called from inside the manor, and all three cheered happily, dashing into the closest room with a TV.

"Loon-toon!" Damian said angrily, tugging on his father's shirt, and when Bruce didn't react, reaching out towards Clark with a concentrated look on his face. "Cla'! Loon-toon!"

"You got it, buddy," Clark laughed, and grabbed the toddler from his father's grasp.

"It's bad that you've become the one he goes to when I don't do things, or don't do things fast enough," Bruce said as Clark followed the children, much to Damian's delight.

"Probably. But he's happy, right? All that matters," Clark grinned.

"Stop spoiling my child," Bruce said.

"Nope," Clark called behind him before disappearing into the room with the kids.

"No!" came Damian's victorious shout, and Bruce scoffed to himself before following them.

They watched TV until nearly bed time, when the kids started whining about a snack. Bruce took them into the kitchen for a snack, but stopped Clark before he followed them.

"We need to have a chat," Bruce said, blocking the entrance to the kitchen. Clark steeled himself and nodded.

"Can I at least say goodbye to them first?" he asked silently, and Bruce stared at Clark for a moment in silence before sighing.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked. Clark gave him a hopeful look.

"Nothing," he said.

"That's a little sad, don't you think? That you have nothing else to do than spend time with children?"

"Hey, I'm spending time with my best friend," Clark pointed out with a grin, nudging his shoulder. "He just happens to have cute kids who like me."

"Hmm," Bruce grunted, and narrowed his eyes at Clark. "Sunday night, you're staying at your own apartment."

"Sure," Clark grinned, since he was sure he could convince Bruce that he needed help with the kids before that. Maybe. Hopefully.

"But," Bruce interrupted, a hand on Clark's chest to stop him from going further. "You're not borrowing my good, expensive shirt to sleep in again. Go home. Grab a pair of pajamas. A toothbrush."

"Actually, I- I already have one here. Alfred got it for me," Clark said sheepishly.

"Of course he did," Bruce sighed to himself. "At least a pair of fresh clothes for tomorrow. You can't wear the same outfit for three days in a row, Clark. Especially with those hideous shirts and unmatched pants. Watch out or I'll order my tailor down here to fit you a proper suit."

"You'll never catch me," Clark smirked and floated up in the air and back. Bruce shooed him off out through the parlor door, and then returned to the kitchen, where Dick had conjured sandwiches for his brothers and himself.

"Where'd Clark go?" Jason asked suspiciously, and Tim narrowed his eyes at Bruce. Dick raised his chin challengingly.

"Oh, come on. He's just going home to get some fresh clothes. God knows he could use them. He'll be back. I didn't banish him forever and ever," Bruce scoffed, taking the sleepy Damian out of Dick's arms and sitting down by the kitchen island with his children.

"He better be," Jason said firmly, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"He'll be back any moment. Don't worry," Bruce said firmly.

Speaking of, time to test a theory out before Clark comes back.

"So, what do you think of Diana?" he asked.

"Diana is *awesome*!" Jason crowed, and Dick nodded vigorously.

"Yes, she's... commendable. Do you think we should be together?" Bruce asked, because to his children, the criteria for being in love were making each other happy and kissing. He had made Diana laugh in their presence and kissed her cheek to test this theory. He wanted to hear their thought process on this.

"Nah," Dick said, shaking his head as he bit into his sandwich, and Bruce recieved a calm shake of the head from Tim and a frown of agreement from Jason.

"How come? I'm just as happy in Diana's presence as in Clark's."

"No, you don't do the same eyes," Jason said, and Tim hummed in agreement as Dick snapped his fingers.

"Exactly," he chirped.

"Same eyes?" Bruce questioned skeptically. "I don't make eyes at either Clark or Diana."

"What? Dude. I honestly don't know how someone as smart as you can be so damn dumb, Bruce," Jason said incredulously. "You do *moon eyes*. Like they do on TV." Jason opened his eyes as wide as he could and used his fingers to pry his eyelids away further, making his eyes look even bigger.

"I do?" Bruce asked, surprised and skeptical. His children were perceptive, but were they that perceptive? He didn't do it purposefully, at least. He'd have to work on it, if the children thought he was attracted to people just because he was looking at them.

"Not just you. Clark too," Tim said, and patted his arm reassuringly. Bruce stared at Tim a little incredulously, but the boy just went back to eating his sandwich.

"Well, your version of moon eyes is much more sneaky than Clark's," Dick admitted, kicking his feet a little.

"And I don't do that with Diana?"

"No," Tim said decisively. He got affirmative shakes of the head from the other children, and narrowed his eyes in thought.

"Glad we gave you something to think about," Dick said, his eyes

flashing with something surprisingly adult. Magic had a pattern, Diana had said. You don't notice until you undo it. Hmmm. He should try to call Zatanna again.

Titus trotted into the kitchen, nosing Damian who was nearly asleep in Bruce's lap. The toddler reached out, still half-asleep, and patted Titus head.

"That's our cue to go to bed," Bruce said decisively, and got groans and protests from the children. "Undebatable. Let's go."

"Clark's not back yet!" Jason argued.

"That's true," Bruce said as he stood up and helped Tim off the high chair, as well as nudging Jason. "However, we don't need Clark to do everything with us, boys. We're Waynes."

"Yeah, we have a butler we need to do everything with us instead," Dick said cheekily, and Bruce rolled his eyes as he shooed all of them out of the kitchen.

"Very funny, Dick," he said in a monotone, and Dick grinned up at him, pressing into his side. Bruce was still a little shocked by Dick's constant affection. Had he taken this for granted when Dick was this young the first time around? That felt impossible.

"I thought so," his kid said very proudly, and Bruce couldn't help the scoff that came out of his mouth when he ruffled his dark hair. They walked up the stairs and came down to the corridor with the bedrooms.

"Alright, Tim, Jason, Dick, line up in the main suite's bathroom in your jammies in two minutes. Go, go, go!" he said loudly, and all three took of for their separate rooms, giggling and going 'I'm gonna be first this time!'.

Clark finally made it back to the mansion around midnight. He'd taken some time to go talk to Lois, but well there she'd captured him and grilled him on Bruce and why he wasn't staying in his own apartment currently. Lois wasn't about to let him leave until he told the truth, but he managed to escape by the skin of his teeth without letting the cat out of the bag.

Once he got back, nobody was awake anymore. All the kids were in

their designated beds, for once, except for Tim, who had crawled into Bruce's bed again, and was now laying back to back with Damian, who was clutching his stuffed bat and sleeping soundly.

Bruce himself was down in the cave, getting ready to go out. The only thing that wasn't on yet was the cowl, and Bruce was adjusting his armguards as he went, tapping away at the computer now and then.

"Going out again tonight?" Clark asked skeptically, and Bruce narrowed his eyes.

"Yes. Problem? Because Alfred can definitely handle the boys if you want to go home," Bruce said.

"No, it's not that. Why are you so insistent on getting me out of here anyway?"

"No metas in Gotham. You're breaking my rules just to play with my kids," he pointed out, pressing a button to get the screen of the batcomputer to go black.

"I'm helping out, like good friends do," Clark pointed out right back.

"I don't need your help."

"You do. You're just not very good at asking for it," Clark said and watched as Bruce walked over to the batmobile, pulling his cowl on as he went.

"You sound like Alfred."

"Thank you," Clark said, and was shot a dirty look over Bruce's shoulder. He smiled at his best friend, who tapped on his wrist.

"I'm going out on patrol. Feel free to use... Whatever. Maybe not the jungle gym. Or the batcomputer. Alfred is probably asleep, but you're a bachelor. You know how to make your own food," he said a little flippantly, and Clark nodded.

"Alright. Well, be careful."

Bruce didn't reply, just hopped into the batmobile and took off out into the night.

Meeting up with Cass in Crime Alley, they took down a few thugs trying to rob a jewelry store before going separate ways. He then picked up a trail on Scarecrow and let Babs know since she was in the

area, before going off on his own. Without Robin's snappy commentary on the fighting styles of his assailants, they weren't as distracted. Fear was one distraction factor, sure, but confusion was just as good, and a combination of the two was optimal.

He had just found Scarecrows lab for the time being, disabling the security system and letting himself in, when he felt a sense of dread flood him. That'd be the fear toxin. Bruce administered an antidote before he moved on, but the toxin was strong or altered, because his hands were still shaking a little, and his head was aching just a little bit already.

Bruce hadn't realized that Scarecrow was working with Bane before he saw them through the vent, but it made sense. Scarecrow was good at formulas, he could probably produce Venom if he was just presented with a small sample and components.

Just before the Venom was being shot into Bane's body, Batman came crashing into the room, but not nearly fast enough. The combination of the anxiety and fear from the remnants of the toxin and annoyance about not realizing Bane would be here was probably why he got bowled over pretty quick.

Bruce couldn't really remember what happened in the gap of time between that and placing a drained Bane and a knocked out Scarecrow on the sidewalk. He vaguely remembers speaking to Stephanie, and possibly Barbara, but then everything just goes black.

Next thing Bruce knew he was in his own bed. And he could tell because of the sheets, and because he knows the smell of his own house. There was the rustle of someone grabbing the sheets, and since Bruce's head was pounding pretty hard, and he was out of danger, he didn't think that was very important and sorted that sound out of his mind. At least for a moment.

"Broose?" Tim asked, and he was back to being quiet. Bruce eyes shot open, and Tim's eyes were so large and scared as they stared at him in the dark. He hummed, not convinced he was able to really move right now. His back really hurt and he had only a vague memory of tonight's patrol and Alfred muttering angrily.

Oh, shit.

"Hey Tim," he forced himself to croak, and tried to sit up. However, he

felt sharp pain stab him in the ribs and spine, and oh. There was the sound of something large moving very fast outside in the hallway, and Tim was underneath the bed before Bruce had really had time to blink. The door opened quickly and silently, and Clark's harried face peeked in.

"Tim, what did I say about-" Clark whispered, and then looked up to see him half-sitting in bed. "Oh my god, Bruce!"

Immediately, the reporter was by Bruce's bedside, gently pushing him back down.

"Jesus, you had us scared half to death. Concussion, bruised ribs, you tore your stitches. Even your spine's bruised, Bruce!" Clark said as he aggressively fluffed the pillows underneath Bruce's head, looking very angry. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Bruce narrowed his eyes at Clark.

"Tim, come out here. Clark's not mad," Bruce said, and Clark put his hands on his hips.

"Well, not at Tim at least. You, however-"

"Gonna call me 'mister' and straighten me out, Kansas boy?" Bruce snapped as Tim's head peeked over the edge of the mattress.

"I actually might, now that you mention it!" Clark snapped back, but he still looked pretty damn mad and his voice was a little more high pitched than usual. Upset then, rather than angry. Clark's tone went down when he was angry but up when he was distressed.

Bruce decided to utilize Tim's presence to his advantage. He looked over at Tim and held his hand out.

"I'm fine, Tim. We're Batman and Robin, right? This isn't the first injury we've had," Bruce said, winking at Tim, who crawled up on the bed and took possession of his hand with both of his tiny ones.

Tim didn't reply, which really showed just how worried he was. Bruce felt his heart wrench when Tim looked up at him from under his hair, eyes wet and little hands squeezing his fingers nervously.

"You scared us half to death, B," Clark repeated, but his voice was softer now, and when Bruce looked over, Clark had sat down in the chair by his bedside.

"**What happened?**" Bruce asked in Kryptonian, trying to give Tim an out. Tim, who usually would've been angry about being excluded from the adult world, just played with Bruce's fingers silently, not looking up. Also a cause for concern, as well as the silence.

"**Don't know. I was asleep. Alfred said something about you just arriving in your car without steering**," Clark said, catching on quickly, and glancing over at Tim a little guiltily.

He must have pressed the emergency button. If he was in bad enough condition, the Batmobile would auto-steer back to the cave. The bikes had the same emergency system. The emergency button would also alert Alfred. It added up.

"**Any poison?** Scarecrow's?" Bruce asked, switching to English again when he couldn't think of a good Kryptonian word for him.

"Yeah. Alfred said it was a high dose," Clark admitted.

"Right," he stated. "Are the girls alright?"

"Yeah, I checked. Cass is still asleep, Stephanie is at her own apartment, and Babs too." Bruce let out a relieved sigh and relaxed back into the pillows. At least the girls were safe.

"The boys?"

"Ask Tim," Clark said and raised an eyebrow at him challengingly. Bruce looked over at Tim again, and squeezed his tiny hands. Tim looked up at him again, now clearly worried.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Twelve pm," Tim replied silently.

"Well then," Bruce said, and took his hand back to sit up. Clark made disproving noises, but when he realized Bruce was pretty determined to get up, he helped him into a sitting position. "That means I shouldn't be lazing around."

"That's exactly what you should be doing!" Clark exclaimed as Bruce tossed his feet over the edge of the bed. When Clark tried to stop him, Bruce swatted his hands off and got up, taking slightly shorter breaths than usual to keep the pain in his ribs to a minimum.

"I'm not an invalid, Kal," Bruce snapped when Clark tried to get him

back to bed, and Clark gave him a sharp look.

"Quit it. You should be resting right now, not walking around!"

"Ah, Master Bruce. As usual, you're out of bed when you shouldn't be," came Alfred's voice from the doorway. Bruce and Clark looked over to see a worried Tim now standing in the doorway, holding onto Alfred's pressed slacks. Bruce hadn't even noticed him leaving the room, too busy trying to get Clark off his back.

"I'm not going to stay in bed forever," Bruce snapped irritably, and Alfred's lips pursed just the slightest bit. He sighed tiredly.

"At least let Master Kent support you if you're going to be up and about. You're only allowed to move downstairs to the sitting room where the children currently are, and well there, you are going to sit down and you are going to eat breakfast. Is that clear?" Alfred asked, like he was a damn drill sergeant.

Bruce saw the room tilt slightly before realigning itself, and he was sort of already regretting getting out of bed, but he wasn't a child and wouldn't let Alfred and Clark treat him like it.

He was just about to open his mouth and snap out that if he just got some meds he'd be fine, but then Tim cleared his throat a little. All three adults looked at him.

"Damian made you a drawing," he said silently. "And Jason was really mad and pushed me out of the jungle gym when I asked him why he was so mad."

"Jason's a little volatile, Timmy," Bruce said gently. "If he's in a mood, just don't go near him, okay?" Tim nodded a little. "Now, I believe I have a drawing that's to be presented to me."

"Right," Clark said, and stared at Bruce in consideration for a moment. When he opened his mouth, Bruce held a hand up, realizing what was about to come out of his mouth.

"You're not carrying me like I'm your damn damsel in distress, Clark," he said firmly.

"I'm just saying, wouldn't that be best for your back and ribs?" Clark said, giving him a pointed look.

"If you're to be transported safely downstairs, I don't see another way,

Sir," Alfred agreed, and Bruce narrowed his eyes at his butler threateningly. "Come on Master Timothy. Let's make Master Bruce breakfast."

Tim nodded and took one last peek at the bickering pair in Bruce's bedroom before following Alfred back down the stairs and into the sitting room where Jason was laying draped across a loveseat, tossing a tennis ball against the wall and catching it again. Dick and Damian were nowhere to be seen.

"How's the old man?" Jason asked, sounding unconcerned, but Tim had seen him cry this morning when Alfred told them Bruce was hurt on patrol and wasn't to be disturbed. He was definitely concerned.

"He's awake. Clark's gonna help him down," Tim replied and hopped up into one of the other couches as Alfred went into the kitchen.

Dick was sitting by Damian's high chair, which he'd dragged into the kitchen. Damian was eating pasta and looking generally happy, and Dick was helping him, obviously having set up the whole thing himself.

"Master Richard, you must learn that you don't have to take all of the responsibility," Alfred chided as he watched Dick feed Damian his lunch. The thirteen-year-old looked up and shook his head.

"I'm not," Dick protested, but Alfred still had that sad look on his face as he watched Dick do what was supposed to be Bruce's job. To Alfred, it was heartbreaking to watch Dick pick up Bruce's slack, no matter what age. At 22, dropping everything to become Batman and raise Damian to be who he is. At 20, comforting Tim and trying to reconcile with Jason. Now, at 13, keeping his brothers fed and away from each others' fists.

"Why don't you go play with the other children? Master Bruce will be down any minute, just as soon as Master Clark has convinced him to let himself be carried." Dick scoffed.

"So he's never coming down, huh? Oh well. How's he doing?" he asked, a little too mature for his age when he and Alfred met eyes.

"Better, I believe. If only he can be convinced to sit still for a moment and relax, I believe he'll be better soon," Alfred said as he moved to make Bruce a protein shake.

"Well, where's the cat? If we put the cat in his lap, he won't get to

move. That's just against the laws of being a human," Dick said, handing Damian his sippy cup. Alfred raised an eyebrow at him, and Dick shrugged. "We have a litter box in the bathroom Jason and I share. Besides, some couches have a lot of black cat hairs on them, too small to be from Titus."

Alfred smiled to himself as he turned away.

"Sometimes it's easy to forget that not only Master Timothy is good at detective work," he said. "I believe Alfred the cat is out on an expedition. He's an adventurous lad." Dick snorted.

"We named our cat Alfred?"

"Master Damian did, in fact."

"Yeah, that sounds like him. You're a sweetie, aren't you, little D?" Dick smiled, giving Damian's cheek a loud kiss, leading to a shriek from the toddler.

The protein shake was done by the time Bruce finally made it down to the sitting room. Bruce had only taken Clark's support in the stairs, but he was hoovering closeby and helped Bruce sit down in his armchair.

Immediately, Dick plopped baby Damian in his lap, and then Tim, and then he recieved a breakfast shake as Damian pladdered on in Farsi and Tim solved his rubriks cube.

Alfred watched on from the doorway as Dick snagged Jason's ball from the air and tossed it for Titus before dragging Jason out of the loveseat to sit over by Bruce's armchair, and saw Clark muss Dick's hair, and thought to himself that they made a very sweet family.

Bruce was given strict orders to sit still, and when it was just Alfred, that was fine, he could go against his orders; he'd done so all his life. But when you stacked on Clark's puppy eyes, Dick's insistent pleading, Jason's little pout, Tim's sad eyes, and Damian's uptipped nose, it was pretty hard to say no.

Just because Bruce couldn't move didn't mean the kids didn't need to. He set them loose in the jungle gym, and kept a close eye on Jason. Him shoving Tim out of the jungle gym could be a one-time thing, but if it wasn't, he was gonna have to nip that in the bud. He sat down in

the chair by the batcomputer and looked over footage from last night's patrol and fight to try and write up a report.

Damian was too small for the jungle gym, but Clark kept him entertained by drawing with him, and helping him toss Titus a ball, as well as speaking to him in both Farsi and English, trying to get him to say English words and rewarding him with toys. Bruce sort of tuned them out, however, and he forgot the rest of them were even in the cave until Clark came barging into Bruce's comfort zone, as he was prone to do.

"And you say you don't need my help," Clark scoffed as he set down a tea cup by Bruce's hand.

"I have a butler for that," he pointed out, not looking up from the screen. "Where's Damian?"

Clark held up a baby monitor.

"Nap," he relayed. Bruce looked up, and blinked.

"I didn't know I owned one of those. Besides, you don't need it. You could just hear him." Clark threw his hands in the air as Bruce took a sip of his tea.

"First it's all 'Kal-El don't you dare use your superhearing in my presence again' and then it's all 'you don't even need to use the baby monitor, just use your superhearing'! You gotta get off the fence, B."

Bruce smiled a little, despite himself. Clark had picked up new clothes, and he was now wearing a blue and black flannel, straight out of Kansas. He looked like a true farmers boy.

"Do you want kids, Clark? Voluntary, that is." Clark sort of shrank a little, and he fiddled with the dial on the baby monitor. A nervous gesture. Hmmm.

"I mean... Who doesn't?" When Bruce didn't reply, Clark hesitated. "Were you... Were you and Talia planning on it? You know, before you two... Went your separate ways?" He was blushing a little, twisting the dial again when Bruce didn't answer right away.

"No. But by then I hadn't met Dick yet," he said thoughtfully, and looked over at his oldest, currently doing a one-handed handstand on top of the jungle gym. It was very steady. Bruce wasn't worried in the least. "He sort of... Made me realize how much light kids bring to the

world. We were both very... Angry when we met, but I helped him control his anger and he taught me that sometimes everything isn't entirely dark and bleak."

"You seem to have forgotten that," Clark pointed out. Bruce looked up at him, and hummed.

"No. Talia wasn't much for children, anyways."

"What about Damian, then?" Clark said, leaning against the panel and crossing his arms over his chest. Bruce swallowed.

"He was originally a pawn in a plot to kill me, as you know. Doesn't mean she can't love him anyways, I suppose."

"Hasn't she disowned him?" Clark asked, looking genuinely bewildered.

"Yes. But she also sends him gifts on his birthday, however dangerous. The reason she called me yesterday was because of her wanting to protect him. It's always been hard for Damian to pick a side. As Jason has stated, our 'divorce was epic to the tenth power'."

Clark whistled lowly.

"Yeah. I remember that. Ever wanna get back together with her and give Damian some more siblings?" he asked tenatively. Bruce laughed, and immediately grunted in pain. Clark reached a hand out before he even really knew what he was doing, concerned for his friend even if he couldn't really help.

"Damian has all the siblings he needs here. I think four is enough," Bruce pointed out, waving him off, and Clark grinned.

"Fair enough. Talia then? Miss her?" Bruce considered Clark.

"Why suddenly so interested?" Clak blushed and brushed his suspiciously soft hair back as Bruce observed him with slightly narrowed eyes.

"No reason. Just... Curious," Clark said with a light shrug and an awkward laugh. Bruce looked at him in silence for almost a solid minute, but it wasn't a 'you're being an idiot' look; instead just considering him. Clark could be patient.

"Mostly, no. I don't," he admitted. Clark leaned closer, trying to pry

Bruce's heart open through proximity and an encouraging smile. But then Bruce didn't continue that sentence, and instead fell silent.

"Mostly? What about when you do?" Clark encouraged. Bruce sighed through his nose and turned back to the computer, and Clark could distinctly tell he'd missed a window of opportunity there.

"How's Lois?" Bruce asked, tapping away at his report. He didn't sound entirely disinterested, but he was clearly putting the breaks on whatever Clark tried to ask him. Clark sighed back.

"Fine. Annoyed that I won't tell her what I'm up to." That, at least, earned him a slight quirk of the lips.

"Sounds like her. And the two of you aren't going to work out, why, again?" Bruce asked, looking at him out of the corner of his eye. The pain he'd felt about him and Lois becoming just friends again after two years together was somewhat dulled now, but still hurt, just a little. Then he looked down at Bruce again, saw his best friend and his small smile, and felt the dull hurt fade away.

"We're better as friends than a couple," Clark recited for what felt like the billionth time. He hadn't been convinced of that when he and Lois broke up in the first place, but a couple of months later, he had to admit that they were good at being friends. Much better than they'd been as a couple.

"You managed for two years. Much better than my track record," Bruce muttered, almost to himself, as he squinted at the cowl-cam footage he was watching.

"Well, I'm sure you could change that," Clark said encouragingly.

"Bruce, look!" Dick shouted, and Bruce looked up to see him perched on the highest point of the jungle gym, Jason staring at him from another, slightly lower part, gaping. Tim had both of his hands clasped over his mouth, looking enchanted by Dick's preformance.

"Very cool," Bruce said back, loud enough to be heard without shouting.

"Dick, that's dangerous, you should get down from there," Clark said worriedly, and recieved three incredulous bat-glares.

"Supes, you know we swing from *rooftops.* Right?" Jason drawled, hanging upside-down now.

"When you're older," Clark chided. "Now you don't. And if you fall and break your neck, you're never gonna swing from rooftops."

Dick placed both hands on the slim piece of pipe he was balancing from, and slowly, with remarkable body control, went from a handstand to looking like he was sitting in the air, legs pointing slighty out and forward.

"They're fine," Bruce said dismissively, until he saw Dick wobble a little. Bruce was out of his chair before he'd really registered it, and his spine and ribs protested profusely at the sudden movement. He wouldn't be able to get there fast enough.

However, he wasn't the only one to stand up in terror. Or, in the worried Superman's case, fly. Dick was caught before he fell, thankfully, but Clark gave Bruce a pointed look, and he rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Get off the jungle gym, all of you. Go back upstairs, I have to finish this report."

"No, c'mon, B, come upstairs and watch me beat Dick's ass on Mariokart," Jason urged.

"Yeah, Bruce! It'll be fun!" Dick cheered from where he was still in Clark's arms. Bridal carry, Bruce noticed. Did Clark just automatically catch everyone as if they were damsels in distress?

"I'll beat all of you," Clark said, sounding smug, and Jason and Dick both gasped.

"Get ready to get fucked, Supes!" Jason laughed, taking off for the stairs.

"Language," Bruce called after him, and watched as Clark followed Jason through the air, much to Dick's amusement. Tim appeared around his elbow, and Bruce raised an eyebrow at him in question. Tim picked the baby monitor up, and took Bruce's hand, leading him towards the elevator. "I have no choice, huh?"

"No," Tim agreed, handing Bruce the baby monitor as the elevator doors closed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot of feelings about Bruce and Talia's relationship, alright?
Also thanks for over 600 Kudos???? Absolutely nuts, and I love all of you!!! You're so amazing and awesome!!! Thank you so much for reading this silly little thing of mine, means so much to me! Especially hearing your thoughts about it!! <3<3<3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce thought he was in the clear, that Clark would calmly and without resistance go home to his own apartment for the night and not reappear until this whole mess had resolved itself. Of course, his life wasn't nearly that easy, and his kids were, no matter their age, part of the group of people who never listened to him, as well as the most stubborn children alive.

He could practically hear Alfred asking where they *possibly* could've gotten that from in his usually dry tone in the back of his head when he was cornered in the bathroom after they had brushed their teeth. All four of them, standing in front of him as a united front.

"Can Clark-" Jason began, and Bruce held a hand up, stopping him and leaning against the wall as he went. He could tell they weren't moving for a while, and the walls were wobbling dangerously in front of his eyes. He needed somewhere to center himself.

"Clark has work in the morning. He's not staying a single night more. No arguing. He's been here for five days now. He has to leave sometime, might as well be now," Bruce said. All four children stared up at him, but Bruce was standing his ground. It was unreasonable for a grown man to stay over at his house when he wasn't incapacitated, unable to care for himself, or didn't have a roof over his head. Clark had no business here.

"Why's he gotta go?" Tim asked, genuinely not understanding.

"He's Superman. He belongs in Metropolis."

So? He's Clark, too," Jason pointed out. "And Clark belongs-"

"I don't want Clark to leave," Tim whispered, eyes filled with tears as he looked up at Bruce. However silent, Jason had still cut himself off when he heard it, and now he gave Bruce an accusing look, like 'look what you did'. He really wasn't used to seeing that directed at him by a ten-year-old, of all people.

"Tim, we can't keep Clark here like a prisoner just because you don't want him to leave," Bruce reminded him.

"Clark *wants* to be here though," Dick pointed out. "He's said so."

"He's a grown man. He needs to be reminded he has other friends than just you guys, and he can't do that if he's staying here," Bruce said, trying to grasp onto child logic of some sort. Dick gave him a skeptical look, but Tim seemed to take that into consideration, and Jason scowled as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"That's a good point," he admitted, and Bruce gave a nod.

"I know. He's gotta go home. I know you like him, but he needs to go. Now, hop on to bed. I'll tuck you in in a moment," Bruce said affirmingly, and pushed off the wall to get into his own bedroom.

With only slight stumbling, Bruce managed to take a shower and get into pajama pants. When he entered his bedroom again, Alfred pinned him in the chair by his bedside, redid all his bandages, and poured some painkillers as well as water down his throat.

Then he went to get Damian, and Bruce sat back and stared at the ceiling, trying to get both of his pupils to react together so that the world wouldn't be tilting on it's axis when he got up to tuck the kids in. Maybe he'd get his bed to himself again tonight.

Another instance where he was wrong. The door to his room opened, surprisingly loud, so not Alfred. When Bruce's eyes focused, he noticed Tim standing in the doorway, with a slightly confused Clark standing right behind him.

"Clark's sleeping in here with us," he announced, holding onto Clark's hand firmly. "And you can't say no!"

"It's my bed, I think that gives me a certain amount of authority on who gets to sleep in it," Bruce pointed out. Tim shook his head.

"It's *our* bed. And Clark's gunna sleep in it tonight."

"Tim..." Clark said gently, but Tim held his hand up in a surprisingly Bruce-like manner. Out of sheer surprise, Clark cut himself off, giving Bruce an alarmed look. Bruce let himself smile a little, because there was the Tim that ran his company for him. Cute, really.

"I'm not talking to you, Clark, I'm talking to Broose," he said, and

glared at him, slumped in the chair by his bed. Bruce and Clark met eyes over his head, and Clark gave Bruce a concerned look, nodding towards Tim.

"Why do you want Clark to sleep here with us? If you want to sleep with Clark, you could just go sleep in the guest-room bed," Bruce pointed out gently. Tim's lower lip wobbled a little, but he still looked very fierce and angry.

"No. He sleeps here, with us," Tim said again.

"Why? His bed is comfortable too, I'm sure. The one in his own apartment, even more so," Bruce said, raising his eyebrows at Clark, who was still giving Tim a worried look. He shrank down on his knees to try and get to eye-level with Tim.

"He's not going home," Tim announced.

"Tim, sweetheart, I'm flattered you want me to stay longer..." Clark said gently, trying to meet Tim's eyes. The little boy was still glaring at Bruce though. "But why with you guys?" When Tim didn't reply, Clark looked over at Bruce, and then scoffed gently. "Tim, honey, Bruce is fine, okay? He's not going to sneak out and go on patrol, even if I'm not here. I promise."

Bruce's eyebrows shot up. Tim was worried about him? Well, the silence earlier had been a little concerning, certainly. Just didn't think he was worried enough to the extent that he'd try to keep Superman at the manor as a guard dog.

"I like sleeping on Broose, but Alfred said ribs are right here, so I can't sleep there, but I wanna hold Broose's hand, so you have to sleep here," Tim said, showing on Clark's torso where ribs were, and that made a little bit more sense. Child logic, after all, made a surprising amount of sense sometimes.

Clark, looking slightly gobsmacked, looked up at Bruce.

"Not like we haven't had to share a smaller bed before," he pointed out after a moment. "**Tim could use the comfort, B. You've really scared him**," Clark added in Kryptonian, though on the inside he was panicking a little. He'd do pretty much anything for this little Tim, and sometimes you have to sacrifice things, like, say, your sanity, for children you love.

Bruce looked over at the now teary-eyed Tim, and sighed.

"You know your good sides and you use them to your advantage, Tim. I'm as proud as I am annoyed," he said, and oh, that was probably the pain-killers kicking in. He pinched his hand. Yeah, definitely the painkillers.

"Clark stays?" Tim said a little warily, making it seem like he'd intended for it to be a command except for the sweet, hopeful tone in his voice. Bruce sighed.

"He stays," he said, adding in Kryptonian, "**until he's asleep**."

"Sure," Clark agreed, and Tim grinned at Bruce sweetly, reaching his arms out to get picked up by Clark.

"We're clear!" Tim yelled out the door, and Dick and Jason immediately appeared, holding their pillows and smiling sweetly.

"You're all devious," Bruce accused as Alfred came into the room carrying the sleepy Damian. "Devious, calculating, manipulative-"

"Yeah, yeah, get in the bed," Dick laughed dismissively as he ran for the bed and jumped up, doing a quick somersault like the little gymnast he was. Jason hurried to crawl after, and Bruce was aided by Alfred to get on his feet. Damian was placed in the co-sleeper, and Bruce carefully climbed into bed.

"Goodnight, Sirs. Sleep well," Alfred said, and recieved a chorus of sleepy replies from the children.

"C'mon Clark," Tim said impatiently, tugging on Clark's shirt, and he looked a little unsure, but then set Tim down and unbuttoned his shirt. Bruce had seen Clark mostly naked before, but with the drugs and the current circumstances, things felt different. Still just the biological needs making themselves known. Clark was right. He needed to change his dating record, really. Soon, too.

Finally, Clark slipped into bed, and helped Tim up onto his chest. Immediately, he spread out like a little starfish, and reached out a hand over the huge bed to Bruce. Bruce stretched his arm over so that Tim could clutch at his fingers, and Dick immediately wrapped himself around Jason like a sleepy octopus. Jason for his part, didn't seem particularly bothered by this.

Bruce waited until he counted four heavy breathing-patterns. Clark's chest was rising and falling slowly, but he wasn't asleep yet.

"Clark, we need to talk," Bruce murmured. Clark twitched on the other side of the bed in the darkness, shifting a little.

"'Bout?" he sighed back.

"You. Staying here. When we *agreed*."

"I'm sorry, you're the one letting me,"

"You're not protesting the children. Stand up for yourself more, you pushover."

"Coming from you, that's rich. One blink from Tim and you cave like a house of cards," Clark whispered back, turning his head and cracking open one eye.

"He grew out of the whole waterworks schtick before he came to me. I never managed to become immune," Bruce muttered. "In any way, I just... Don't want them hurt. Which is another key point. I really don't need them to become dependent on you, Clark."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll leave," Bruce whispered, staring straight into Clark's eyes. "You'll make them get dependent and attached to you, and then you'll leave, and when you do, they'll be heartbroken and won't get over it. I'd rather it happen now than two weeks into this mess."

Clark gaped at him in the darkness, looking straight into Bruce's surprisingly vulnerable eyes. There was steel in them, though, which wasn't unlike Bruce. Everyone thought of Batman as rude, angry, a know-it-all, and in some ways he was. People never bothered to find out why, not bothering to get past the calloused surface of his skin to see why.

Bruce had lost his parents when he was very young. Then he had found Dick, and lost him to Bludhaven. Then found Jason, and lost him to the Joker. Then Tim, and Damian, and managed to lose it all when he himself died. Batman was angry and hard and calculating so that nobody else would have to suffer like he did, losing practically everyone he's ever loved.

"I'm not going to leave, Bruce," he promised softly, wanting to reach out and grasp his best friend's hand.

"Natural disaster, terrorist attack, Lois getting tossed off a building; it's

going to happen. I don't want them in the middle of it. It's best if you just take off now and don't come back until I've solved this."

Clark stayed silent as he thought. Bruce was pretty much always right. However annoying that was, whenever Clark ignored Bruce's warnings or simply didn't give him the credit he was due, things always managed to crash just as epically as Bruce had originally predicted.

He stroked Tim's back gently, and listened to the four gently thumping hearbeats lying right here in bed with him. He didn't ever want to cause them harm, of course.

"Like a band-aid then, huh?" he chuckled a little sadly, focusing specifically on Bruce's slow, crawling heartbeat. It was calming him a little as he smoothed Jason's hair down, reaching over Bruce to stroke Damian's cheek as he sucked on the ear of his bat.

Bruce only hummed in response, and Clark took a deep breath before slowly disentangling himself from Tim, tucking him into Jason's spread arms instead. Tim mumbled a little, but didn't wake up, instead rolling up on top of Jason.

Clark stared at the boys in the dark for a moment, and then pulled his clothes on, shoving his glasses up on his nose a little nervously.

"Goodnight, Bruce," he whispered.

"Goodnight," Bruce replied just as silently, and then Clark walked over to Bruce's balcony, silently stepping through the door and taking off into Gotham's warm summer night.

Bruce slept restlessly during the night, probably due to the painkillers. They always managed to give him nightmares. Whenever he woke up, however, one of his children were reaching out for him in their sleep, trying to comfort him. It was sweet enough that a few of the times, he just stayed awake, holding whoever was comforting him now's hand and looking at them. His boys. His precious boys.

He pondered if Jason would ever willingly be wrapped up in both Tim and Dick's arms when he was an adult. Really, he'd never even seen teenage Jason try to hug teenage Tim. Them becoming this close as their older versions seemed practically impossible to him. Children were really the most curious, odd things.

Alfred came in around the time when Damian began shifting and fussing silently, and took the toddler away. Bruce was pretty sure he wasn't going to get anymore sleep anyway, so he got up with them, and felt Alfred's silently judgy look at the back of his neck when he got himself downstairs to the breakfast table all on his own.

"Master Kent left, then?" Alfred asked lightly as he returned from putting Damian back down with the other boys. Bruce didn't look up from his handheld batcomputer module.

"Mhm," he hummed, and Alfred pursed his lips.

"And with how much urging on your part, Master Bruce?" he asked. Bruce sighed.

"It's for the best," he said firmly, looking up to meet his butler's eyes as Alfred put down a bowl of yogurt and two toasts in front of him. "I'll hear nothing against it."

"Of course, Mister Wayne," Alfred said very disapprovingly, eyes slightly narrowed, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

The dining room was only silent and calm for another half-hour, before he heard sleepy feet dragging against the carpet on the stairs, and then the marble in the entrance hall. Tim was talking about something very seriously, but seemed to be having a one-sided conversation, seeing as he got no reply.

When the four of them came into view, it was clear that Tim was talking to his stuffed lion, who had been named Shakira, after Jason's insistence that Shakira was an amazing name.

"Good morning!" Tim said, smiling at Bruce. Bruce felt himself smiling back without really thinking about it as Tim placed Shakira on the table next to his spot by the table.

"Where's Clark?" Jason yawned, ruffling his own hair distantly.

"At work. In Metropolis. Like he should be," Bruce said firmly.

"Oh. Well then he's coming back for dinner, isn't he?" Dick asked, placing Damian in his high chair.

"No," Bruce replied, sipping his tea. The kids froze, and Bruce felt four pairs of eyes pinned at him.

"Oh, *fuck you*," Jason said incredulously after a moment of complete silence.

"*Jason*," Dick gasped, and Bruce looked up to meet Jason's eyes.

"Language," he growled, but Jason tipped his chin up in a challenge. Oh boy.

"No, fuck you! Just because we like Clark and you're dealing with your own shit, you're gonna make him leave? That's bullshit!" Jason said, his volume rising.

"I'm doing you a favor," Bruce said sharply, trying to remain calm. Jason at twelve had been a volcano ready to erupt any second, there was no reason Jason at ten would be any different. Really, Bruce was surprised Jason hadn't gotten into a screaming match with one of his siblings yet. Trauma had a tendency to do that to kids.

"That's what you always say! You don't always know what's the best for us! 'I'm doing you a favor', yeah *fucking right*, that doesn't bring Clark back, does it? Why do you have to be so mean and selfish!" Jason shouted. "He's just trying to help and you're being an asshole about it, just like you always are, and I can't fucking-"

"Go to your room," Bruce said, his voice deathly low. Jason stomped his foot on the ground furiously.

"You can't make me!" he yelled.

"Says who?" Bruce said, standing up threateningly. Jason hopped up on his chair to get eye-level with Bruce, not buying into his I'm-taller-so-I'm-right bullshit. "You're going to go to your room calmly, and then you're going to stay there and think about using such foul, vile language, and if when I come up to see if you've calmed down, you're still cussing, I'm grabbing the soap. You hear me?"

Jason stood there, looking absolutely furious as he glared at his guardian and mentor. They had a staring contest in silence for almost a full minute as Dick and Tim watched on in horror, until Bruce's eyes narrowed.

"*Now*, Jason," Bruce said very calmly.

"Fine!" Jason shouted, kicking down the chair before storming out of the room.

"I said *calmly*!" he yelled after him, and got a 'screw you!' back. Bruce took a deep breath and was immediately reminded of his sore, painful ribs. Tim had hidden underneath the table with Shakira as soon as Jason started being loud, Damian had an evil grin on his face, and Dick looked sort of gobsmacked, really.

"Clark has a life other than us, alright? We can't demand that he spend every single second here with us," he said as he crouched to look underneath the table at the wide-eyed Tim. "That'd be cruel to Clark too."

Tim didn't look convinced, but came out to eat breakfast. Dick sat down too, giving Bruce a squinty look, seemingly not happy with Jason being sent to his room but not displeased enough to do anything about it.

Alfred came into the room just as Bruce sat back down, handing Bruce Damian's breakfast. Bruce began breaking the waffle into smaller pieces and handing them to Damian.

"Was that Master Jason's shouting I heard? What memories that brings back," Alfred murmured as he set down a glass of orange juice by Bruce's elbow, very deliberately. He placed a stack of waffles on the table, and Dick's cereal. Tim went for the waffles and began to eat in silence.

"He's been sent to his room. I'll probably need a bar of soap for later," Bruce sighed, and Alfred scoffed.

"You'd need more than one bar of soap to clean out his mouth, Master Bruce," he murmured.

"Tell me about it." Bruce watched Tim and Dick eat dejectedly, and found his glance getting stuck on Clark's empty seat, except it wasn't Clark's seat at all. Just where he'd been lately.

Cassandra came into the room and looked around as her eyes narrowed. She denied Bruce his normal morning sign of affection, and instead placed a kiss on Alfred's cheek, as well as all of her siblings. Great. Wonderful.

A good start to a Clark-free Monday.

The rest of the day continued in somewhat the same fashion, with his

children being displeased with him and finding various passive aggressive ways to show it. When Bruce pointed it out to Alfred, he only raised one greying eyebrow and, in a tone identical to the one Bruce had heard in his head, asked him *exactly* where he thought they got that from.

Damian kept asking about Clark, and shouting angrily and crying when he was told Clark wasn't here. When Bruce tried to pick him up and soothe him, Damian got in a good suckerpunch right into one of Bruce's injured ribs. Dick had to take over the tantrum-throwing Damian as Bruce tried to remember how to breathe again.

By lunch, Bruce decided to track down Jason. He was pretty sure Alfred had fed him earlier, because while he didn't like Jason yelling, Alfred wasn't one to let a child go hungry. He'd probably given him a grilled cheese or something. In case he hadn't, Bruce had an apple in hand as he walked down the corridor with all the bedrooms.

Reaching Jason's door, Bruce knocked, and waited for a moment.

"Jason?" he called through the door. He got no reply, and opened the door silently, just a crack. When he looked inside, there was no Jason to be found. Bruce sighed to himself. Was he really this bad with his kids when Clark wasn't around to smooth out the edges?

However, Bruce could list four places off the top of his head where an angry or hurt Jason would go in the manor: his own room, the kitchen, the cave, or the library. He wouldn't be hard to find. Bruce'd spent the majority of the day downstairs by the kitchen, so he knew he wasn't there. The cave didn't accept his fingerprints currently, since Bruce didn't want any of them down there without him. That left the library.

Indeed, curled up in his favorite reading chair in the back of the library, Jason was reading The Lion, the Witch and the Warderobe, snacking on, as Bruce had suspected, a grilled cheese. Bruce just stared for a moment, taking in Jason's concentrated little pout. Jason probably hadn't sat in that chair in four years. It was sort of heartbreaking to think about, really. Jason had really loved that chair when he was young and just turned into Robin.

"What happened to staying in your own room?" Bruce asked, but he kept his voice neutral. He wasn't really angry. Jason was just exceptionally good at making his temper flare up, no matter his age. It was as much a talent as a pain in everyone's ass.

"Got boring," Jason said, looking up at him suspiciously over the top of his book. "Gonna grab the soap?"

"Don't know. Gonna cuss at me?" Bruce asked, raising an eyebrow at him. Jason shrugged.

"Don't know. I still think you're a-" When Bruce's other eyebrow shot up, Jason cut himself off. "Meanie," he finished. Bruce scoffed.

"We can manage without Clark," he said firmly.

"We, or you?" Jason asked, raising his chin challengingly.

"All of us. We're Batman and Robin. We don't need anyone else."

"Except Alfred," Jason pointed out. "And Babs. And Steph. And Commissioner Gordon. And Cass. And-"

"Right," Bruce said, cutting Jason off, who shrugged and snuggled up in the chair again. Bruce placed the apple in his hand on the little side-table where Jason's grilled cheese was. "What I mean is... Clark's not a constant. Okay?"

"What's that mean?" Jason questioned.

"A constant is... Something that doesn't change. We can't rely on him to be here all the time. He has a life, and other friends, and things to do."

"I doubt that," Jason said skeptically. "He's pretty lame."

"And yet you want him here?" Bruce asked, smiling all the same.

"Well, Clark's the good kind of lame. Pushover-lame," Jason said with a sparkly grin. "I could probably get him to get me whatever I want from around the world if I just asked nicely."

"Fair enough," Bruce conceded. He tried to steer the conversation away from Clark. "What are you reading?"

"Lion, Witch, and the Warderobe," Jason said, tilting the book cover so Bruce could see better. "Alfred said you liked it when you were younger."

"My mother used to read it to me before I went to sleep," Bruce nodded. "Liking it so far?"

"I liked *Pride and Prejudice* more, but it's alright," Jason shrugged. Bruce hummed, and held a finger up, before roaming over to his mother's old bookshelves. Jason had a copy of it in his room, seeing as 'Emma' was a favorite of his, but this was the first copy he'd read of it.

When Bruce returned, Jason was watching him curiously. Bruce placed the book next to Jason's apple and grilled cheese and tapped the cover with a finger.

"Jane Austen's *Emma*. I know you'll like that one," Bruce promised.

"Same writer?" Jason asked, glancing over at the dulled sheen of the book's cover.

"As *Pride and Prejudice*, yes." Jason made a theatrically disinterested 'hmm' noise, and Bruce suppressed his smile.

"Can I go downstairs again?" he asked.

"Depends. Have we agreed that Clark going home was for the best?"

"No."

"Are you gonna tone down the cussing?" Bruce pressed. He hadn't really expected that Jason would agree with him; when was the last time he had, really? Children in general weren't good at changing their opinions, usually out of pure stubbornness. With Jason, it was the usual stubbornness but times ten.

"I might," Jason snarked.

"Can we agree that I'm the adult and I make the decisions I believe are right?" Bruce asked patiently.

"Yeah, decisions you *believe* are right," Jason emphasized. "That we can agree on."

That was probably as good as it was going to get.

"Fine. You're allowed downstairs if you limit your cussing."

"Sweet," Jason grinned, taking a huge bite out of his grilled cheese. Bruce sighed silently to himself and walked out into the main part of the library, finding Cassandra curled up on the couch by the fireplace with Alfred the cat curled up on her stomach.

"Sleep okay?" he asked her. Cassandra narrowed her eyes at him, and

didn't reply. "We're not talking today, huh? Is it because you're not feeling up to it, or because you're mad at me?"

The pissed look she shot him spoke volumes. Bruce accepted that, and walked out of the library to try and get some work done in the cave.

Clark's Monday was a little more exciting. He'd come home in the middle of the night and settled in bed, but then he'd had to wake up twice to go rescue people, once from a burning building, and the second time to round up zoo animals that had managed to escape.

With barely any sleep, he then went to work, and had to buy a very large coffee before he took the elevator to his floor. Didn't taste like Alfred's good roast with cinnamon in it, but it'd have to do. Once there, Lois took one look at him, and left him and his tired, sad ass alone until lunch-time.

By then, she'd grown tired of his moping, and grilled him for details again. Lois didn't know the identity of Batman, but she knew the Robins were his kids, so when Clark finally broke down and told her about where he'd been lately, she stared at him for a solid minute in silence. Unusual for her, but she was very obviously thinking.

"Okay, so," she finally began silently. "You're telling me... You like Batman's kids more than your own kid? That is... So horrible of you. Call your damn kid, Clark! Tell him you've had a change of heart and want to take him to fricking baseball game or something!"

"He doesn't want to go to a baseball game with me. He doesn't even like me," Clark protested.

"I don't know if I like you very much right now, you hypocrite!" Lois said, entirely astonished, and her voice was getting a little louder. "You can't be a mean dad to your own kid and then turn around and dote and love on someone else's kids. That's just not right, Clark. If not a game, a dinner, at least."

"Conner doesn't like me! He doesn't want to have dinner with me!"

"Not with that fucking attitude of yours, no! Reach out to him, tell him you're taking him out for burgers." When Clark opened his mouth to protest, Lois held her hand up. "If you don't, I'm calling Ma."

"Okay, okay! Geeze. He's not going to agree though," Clark pointed

out, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Shut up and text him, Smallville."

Clark sent a slightly awkward text asking Conner if he wanted to grab burgers with him for dinner, and was sent an equally awkward and confused reply back. However, the teen agreed, and Lois clucked her tongue.

"Men!" she exclaimed. "Can't do anything remotely emotionally challenging without someone holding your hand." Clark was about to protest, when he was interrupted by a door slamming open.

"Lane! Kent!" Perry shouted from across the bullpen, and Lois rolled her eyes before turning around with a sweet, charming smile.

"Yes Perry?" she shouted back sweetly.

"Get in my office, now!" he shouted, and Lois shrugged.

"Duty calls, Smallville. Don't wimp out on your kid, or I'll have to sic your Ma on you," she said, poking him in the chest with a sharp nail.

Chapter End Notes

Jason is a sucker for victorian dramas, okay? He's an Intellectual(TM), alright?
Anyway, I'm done with my exams and school stuff for this year!!!! Praise!!! Thanks so much for being amazing and awesome and saying my writing is good? It's really *clutches heart* really really wonderful for me when you think I'm doing things right and it encourages me like hell to keep writing!!!
Also thank you for reading and commenting in general!!! You're all the best people ever and I want you to know I love you *smooch* <3<3<3

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"This wasn't exactly what I thought you had in mind when you said 'burgers'," Conner said as he stacked another robber on top of the ones already piled underneath the streetlight. "I mean, I guess you could call it a stack of pancakes, if you wanna stretch, but not burgers, really."

They were standing outside the bank, with rubber-necks all over the place, taking pictures of Superman and Superboy, standing over the robbers. Their dinner hadn't even really began before Clark had to leave, and when Conner's shoulders drooped a little, Clark had asked if he wanted to team up with him. Just this once. Conner had agreed.

"I *did* mean for us to go get burgers," Clark said defensively. "It's Metropolis, though. Can't exactly skip out on my duties."

"Right," Conner agreed with a slight nod, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. Clark felt a strong urge to do the same, but he was always unsettled whenever Kon did something that reminded him of himself. Looking at Kon in general did that to him. He wondered how often Ma accidentally called Conner Clark nowadays.

"Well, I'm still up for burgers, if you are," Clark said after a minute of silence. Conner shrugged.

"I'm in. Ma doesn't believe burgers are real food. It's been a while," he admitted. Clark chuckled.

"Well, at least her cooking is good."

"Oh, yeah. If I get good grades, she bakes me *pies*," Conner said, eyes a little wide with wonder. "Whole pies I get all to myself."

"Really? She used that persuasion technique with me too," Clark grinned.

"Well, it sure is persuasive, that I'll give her," Conner agreed as the two of them flashed smiles for the cameras before taking off into the sky

and dropping down in an alley on the other side of town to change back into inconspicuous Clark and Conner Kent.

"So, how *is* school going, anyway?" Clark asked, and Kon shrugged as they entered the diner.

"Good, I guess. Tim's been helping me out with trig-class, since triangles make no sense to me, but other than that, it's going fine. Not failing, anyway."

"That's always a plus. Still haven't figured out an alternative career to being the Kid?" Clark asked as they sat down. Conner shrugged again.

Another reason why Clark and Conner had trouble getting along: the clone's general attitude towards the future was just 'I'll make it up as I go', which worried and annoyed Clark a great deal. Ma said he'd figure it out, but Clark had trouble believing that. He himself had already figured out he wanted to be a journalist by Kon's age.

Whenever he brought it up, Kon tended to get snappy and say something about maybe going to work for Lex, seeing as he had the birthright, and that always got them into a row.

Their waitress came forward and they placed their orders. Clark decided he should try and swerve away from that topic before they managed to rile each other up again.

"Have you heard about what's been going down in Gotham?" he asked.

"No, but I've been getting the 'don't worry I'm fine, I'm just inactive right now' text Tim's prepared for weird situations, so I've been meaning to check it out. Why?" Kon asked, fiddling with the napkin-holder distantly.

"Well, there's a situation," Clark said, and immediately Kon's eyes snapped up to look at him, wide and a little scared.

"'S Tim okay?"

"He's fine," Clark hurried to say. "The guys are just incapacitated currently. B's hurt, too."

"Yikes. Even the brat?"

"Yes. And Hood." Conner whistled lowly.

"Wow. So the girls are running Gotham? Sweet," he smiled, as their

waitress set down his strawberry milkshake in front of him.

"For the moment."

"And how do you know all this when Bats is super insistent that there can never be any metas in Gotham?" Kon asked, slurping on his milkshake.

"I've been staying there for a while." His clone's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh. Get into Bat's armored jock yet?"

Clark sputtered at Conner's blunt words, and the teen rolled his eyes. His cheeks were flushing a little bit, at least, and Clark was glad Connor could control his blushing better than he could.

"Dude. I'm dating Tim. You don't think I know we're at least a little gay?" Clark could only gape at him a little at that. "I mean, I don't want to know anything at all about your sex life, dear god, but I sorta need to know to win a bet."

"With who?" Clask exclaimed a little incredulously, blushing furiously. Conner's ears started to get a little red as he leaned back in his seat, the vinyl squeaking underneath him.

"Tim. And also Bart. And Ma."

"Ma?!" Clark exclaimed a little louder, making heads turn. He shrank down in his seat as Conner shrugged a little again.

"Ma Kent sees everything," Conner said with a firm nod, and Clark buried his face in his hands, hearing Conner's laugh muffled throuh a mouthful of milkshake.

Cassandra was extremely unhelpful when Bruce asked for her assistance during bedtime, and instead of crowding in his bed, the boys crowded in Dick's bed. That was all well and good, really, it was fine. Bruce would sleep better with them not there kicking him in the middle of the night or reaching out for him.

Damian had finally resigned himself to not having Clark there, but he was a smart child, and from everyone else's reactions, had figured out Bruce was the culprit and the reason why Clark was gone. Therefore, he kept muttering childish insults at Bruce whenever he tried to talk

to him. He'd sort of resigned himself to being picked up, but Bruce made a point of not picking Damian up unless he really had to. That was sort of Clark's thing, in a way.

Bruce didn't like one bit that Clark now had a *thing*.

After a lot of struggle, all children were tucked in and half-asleep, and the girls were out on patrol. Bruce thought he might actually cry from relief when he got to lay down in his own bed and curl up under his heavy covers.

"**Baba**?" came Damian's silent little whisper. Bruce sighed quietly, stopping himself just before he took in enough air to hurt.

"**Yes Damian?**"

"**Does Cla' not think we're presis?**" he asked, and Bruce turned his head to look at the little lump in the co-sleeper.

"**Precious, you mean?**" Bruce asked, and Damian nodded before he rolled out of the co-sleeper and crawled in underneath Bruce's covers like a little mole digging through dirt to get to him. Finally, Damian surfaced, his fuzzy hair standing every which way where he almost draped himself over Bruce. "**Ah-ah. Remember baba's ribs.**"

Damian mumbled a sorry, and Bruce curved an arm around his smallest son, holding him close without really touching each other all that much.

"**Why would you ask that?**" Bruce asked him gently.

"'**Cos he's not here to kiss me. And you kiss me to say I'm presis to you. And Cla' kiss me to say I'm presis to him.**"

"**Clark thinks you're very precious, little prince. Just because he's not here doesn't mean he doesn't think you're precious.**" Bruce remembered Talia's phone call, and stroked a knuckle over Damian's little eyebrows. Immediately his little eyelids drooped a ridiculous amount, and Bruce smiled a little to himself. "**Just like mama thinks you're precious but isn't here.**"

Damian nodded sleepily.

"**Mama smells nice**," he mumbled, in sleepy baby-farsi. Bruce's smile widened a little bit when he noticed his gentle smoothing of Damian's face was really wearing the tiny tot out. "**Cla' too.**"

"Mhm," Bruce agreed silently, dropping a kiss on Damian's little forehead as his breathing turned even and deep.

The next morning was just about as hard, except without Jason's epic trantrum to start the day. Cassandra was still not talking to him, Dick was displeased, and Tim looked ready to dive under the table any second to hide from any yelling. Damian, however, had pretty much forgiven him, and when not petting Titus, drawing, or throwing things at Tim, he was yelling for Bruce to pick him up.

Alfred kept reminding him to be careful, think about his ribs, don't lift heavy, but if Bruce could succeed with just a single one of his children today, he was gonna have to sacrifice his ribs. That was just how it was gonna have to go.

Jason kept still most of the day, reading, and since Jason was calm, Dick sat and helped Tim and Damian draw, even when Damian tried to destroy Tim's work more than once.

After lunch, Tim grew cold and went so far as locking himself in his room without saying what was wrong. When even Dick couldn't lure him out of his room, Bruce sort of resigned himself to being a horrible parent and not being able to understand children for the life of him.

He sat down outside of Tim's room with Damian in his lap and tossing a tennis ball down the hall to Titus, which Damian found very thrilling, and Titus adored. The toddler was nearly keeling over from laughing so hard at Titus scrambling to find the ball when Tim's door opened a crack.

"Want to unpack your electric car?" Bruce asked distantly without looking directly at Tim as Titus delivered the ball to his hand again. He was sort of sure that if he and Tim made eyecontact, the seven-year-old would slam the door in his face again.

"No," came Tim's small voice.

"No? Want me to find Tonya for you?" he asked, looking at Tim out of the corner of his eye.

"No."

"You got Shakira?"

"Yeah."

"Want to talk about it?" he asked. Honestly, what could seven-year-old Tim be so upset about that Bruce wouldn't be able to deal with? Probably had something to do with Jason. When Jason hadn't been reading, he'd been jabbing at Tim, saying his drawings were ugly for no real reason.

"No." Bruce sighed a little to himself, and since Bruce was taking too much time doing unnecessary stuff, in the toddler's opinion, Damian made a noise of impatience and wrestled the slimey ball from his hand, and threw it with all his might down the hallway. Which wasn't very far at all.

"Want to talk to someone else than me about it?" Bruce suggested as Titus retrieved the ball. Tim still hadn't come out of his room, leaving but a crack open for his one eye to peek out of.

"...No."

Ah. There we go.

"You sure?"

"...Diana," Tim decided. Bruce pulled his phone out of his pocket, and tossed Titus ball simultaneously. He called Diana, and once she picked up, held the phone out to the little crack between door and doorframe. Tim's tiny hand slithered out of the crack, took the phone, and retreated. The door closed with a click, and Bruce sighed again.

"Now we wait," he told Damian, who ignored his father in favor of getting up and chasing after Titus and the tennis ball.

He'd managed to not explode on Kon, and Kon hadn't even yelled at him either. Progress. He'd texted Lois to tell her just that, and she'd only responded something vaguely threatening for him to keep it that way and stop being an asshat. That night Clark had slept well, waking up ready to take on the world, but feeling pretty... Lonely.

Superman had to go rescue people from a collapsing building, and stop a bus from going off one of the bridges nearby, but other than that, he wasn't kept too busy by his duties. He caught up on work, read a book, and then flew up to the Watch Tower to have monitor duty.

Clark took on Batman's monitor duty too, waving off Green Arrow's confused look. Batman took monitor duty pretty seriously, and him skipping his time was unusual. Clark wasn't sure how much he could tell Ollie, how close to his chest Bruce wanted to keep this secret, so he just shrugged and said Batman had asked him to take it, and no, he didn't know why.

During his day, Clark found his hearing drifting towards the manor, and the familiar noises of Damian squealing Titus' name, and Bruce's sighs, and Alfred washing the dishes. He did hear Tim sniffling and Jason yelling, but that wasn't his business. He'd *promised* he'd stay away. And he didn't want to break a promise.

But God, did Clark miss it already.

Almost two whole days away from them, and he was missing them like crazy. Bruce's morning hair, Damian's pout, Dick's laugh, Jason's smirk, Tim's big, happy eyes. Cassandra kissing his forehead, Stephanie winking at him. Alfred's little 'hrm' to call his attention.

Clark's eyes flickered over the screens and sighed a little. He heard something vibrate, and pulled his phone out of his cape, frowning at the unknown number having sent him a text.

Come for dinner or Bat dies

Sort of a weirdly specific text. Clark wrinkled his eyebrows in thought.

Who is this?

Cassandra

Clark chuckled to himself, his eyes darting back guiltily to the screens.

Why are you going to kill him? What's he doing?

Same as always. Being dense. Come for dinner or I'm going to stab him with a salad fork

Clark chuckled again, but felt how heavy his heart was when he typed out his response.

He doesn't want me there though

I do

It was the tail end of Batman's pass around dinner, anyway. Maybe he could just... Peek in? No. *No*. He promised! Clark bit his thumb before typing out a quick reply and shoving the phone back into the pocket in his cape.

We'll see

After a while, Bruce had given up on getting Tim to come out, handed Damian over to Alfred, and taken off for the cave. He was settling in to read last night's reports when the cave alarms went off, and he clicked the screens to see an angry Wonder Woman flying through the alarms like an expert.

"Diana," he said, standing up as she came in through the garage, dropping down a couple of feet in front of him, only to stalk up to him with the sort of gait that made him think he was about to get punched. Possibly in the balls.

Bruce grunted when Diana punched him in the arm. Well, one for two. Rather the arm than in the balls.

"Why do you insist on being such a difficult person to love and appreciate? I don't understand," she said angrily. "Why do you push people away when they are trying to help? Trying to assisst? Trying to *understand you*?"

"What did Tim want to speak with you about?" he asked instead of replying.

"That you made Clark take off in the middle of the night and not return!" she said, still sounding sort of angry as she put her hands on her hips.

"We came to the decision together that he should leave," Bruce said calmly, and Diana scoffed.

"Lying to my face! You never 'come to a decision together' when it's you. You say 'jump', and he does, without question," she snapped, poking him in the chest. "I call bull, Bruce. You want him, and you don't like it, and when you don't like things, you push them away."

"I don't want Clark," Bruce said sharply, and Diana threw her hands in the air.

"Of course you do! He's your best friend! He tries to understand you all the time, when everyone else has stopped trying! He listens to you because he trusts you, and you listen to him because you care about him! Whatever lie you're telling yourself to stay away from him, stop it, right now."

She'd poked him in the chest again, and Bruce really considered swatting her hands off, but she was only doing it in the first place to provoke him into a fight. Diana liked fighting, found comfort in speaking with both actions and words, and now that she'd finished with her words, she was looking for action.

"Stay for dinner," he offered. It was around that time, anyway. Diana didn't look any less furious.

"No. Call Clark. I'm not leaving until you do."

"Then I guess you *are* staying for dinner." She gave him an impatient look.

"Why do you keep insisting-"

"Because he doesn't need to be here!" Bruce interrupted sharply. "I don't need the help and the kids don't need to get attached to him. They need to know that they can't just expect Clark to be here all the time! That he's not always going to be!"

"Why do they need to know that? They're children!"

"Children can lose people they love too. Just because they're children doesn't mean they're safe and protected from the world. Just means they're smaller and worse at handling it."

Diana sighed.

"So it is about you, then."

"No. Merely the children."

"No, Bruce. It's about you. Your mind is not a place I'd feel safe in. You should talk to someone. Like *Clark*. The one person who doesn't seem to want to strangle you all the time!" she lashed out, teeth baring. Bruce sat down in his computer chair with a grunt.

"Right. But this is *my* city, *my* children, and *my* house. So unless you're going to stay for a nice, calm dinner, you can fuck off, out of my

house, out of my city," Bruce growled, because his ribs hurt, his children hated him, and Diana yelling wasn't improving his mood in the least.

Diana groaned, rolling her eyes.

"There are times, Bruce, when I don't understand mankind in the least. This is one of those times." When Bruce only narrowed his eyes at her, she sighed. "I only want what's best for you. And what the children want. And what Alfred wants. Which is for you to be happy. I don't see why you deny yourself the simple pleasure of happiness when it's so close, Bruce."

"Why does everyone keep nagging that I'm in love with Clark and love is going to somehow make everything magically *better*?" Bruce snapped, and Diana looked at him, really looked at him for a moment in silence.

Finally, she got down on one knee next to his chair and grasped his face, looking deep into his eyes.

"It saddens me that that's your outlook on love, Bruce," she murmured, and now there was pity on her face. Bruce didn't like that at all, so he swatted her hands off him, and Diana got back up, her hands on her hips. "Who hurt you?"

"Bane, this time," Bruce said, and Diana raised her eyebrows.

"Bane gave you a depressing outlook on love? Somehow, I can't envision that," she admitted. Bruce gave her a dull look, and Diana gave him a shit-eating grin. "I know, B. Just wish someone would pry your cold, iron-clad heart open and let you love again. You deserve it."

Instead of replying, Bruce just gave her an annoyed look and turned back to his computer.

"They miss Clark, Bruce. If you won't do something for yourself, do it for your children," Diana finally said after a moment of silence, and he heard the toe of her boot tap against the stone floor of the cave. "If not for you, for them. Okay?"

Bruce grunted, and Diana sighed.

"Tell Tim that if you're being insufferable again, I'll come beat you up for him," she tossed over her shoulder whilst walking towards the garage entrance.

"Why would I?" Bruce muttered to himself, but Diana heard him, and laughed her electrifying, loud laugh, before taking off through the cave. He had eyes on her until she was out of Gotham, and once she was, he pressed his fingertips together and thought.

Sparing the children from pain meant that they hated him, sometimes.

Them hating him was just easier to take when they weren't pint-sized and still looked up to him. When Cassandra was angry, she could go weeks without speaking to anyone. So far, it'd only been two days, but she could go longer. He knew that. Did he really want Clark away from them so bad he was going to sacrifice Cassandra's progress for it?

Damian missed Clark. Had likened him to his own mother, even. Damian loved his mother very much, however conflicted he became. Tim wouldn't talk to him when he'd told Clark to leave. The first thing Jason had done when Clark had left was have a shouting match with him. Dick wasn't giving out his hugs as freely anymore.

He began wishing Clark had never shown up last week. That would have made all of this much easier.

When Bruce hadn't been paying attention, Clark had passed city limits. He was drawn out of his thinking when the cave alarms went off, and Bruce actually had the burning, intrusive thought that if he pressed one button, he could incapacitate Clark and drag his unconscious, intruding body back in Metropolis by the end of the hour.

But no. He is a better father than that.

He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest, even though Diana's poke still hurt a little, and prepared his best bat-glare for when Clark dropped down.

Once he did, Bruce was confronted with a bouquet of flowers. Irises, to be exact, and a few lilies.

"Clark, what the hell?" he asked.

"I'm a dinner guest. It's either wine or flowers, and I didn't think Cassandra would appreciate the wine. Or you," Clark said, not meeting his eye.

"What happened to you staying the hell out of my house?" Bruce asked incredulously, and Clark smiled at him sweetly, all Kansas-boy

innocence.

"Cassandra invited me for dinner," he shrugged as he rubbed his neck awkwardly, having to restrain himself from saying 'I missed you' out loud and right to Bruce's face. When Bruce looked entirely unamused, his smile faded, and the flowers in his hands drooped. "Look, I'm sorry, I should've called when she texted me, but she seemed really intent I come. Nobody's seen me yet, I can leave and they'll never know I was here."

Bruce restrained himself from reaching for the bruise Damian had given him earlier yesterday, and thought about Cassandra's judgy eyes, and Jason's tantrum, as well as Tim's silence, Diana's yelling. He grunted.

"They're being hellions," he admitted, and Clark's spirits looked lifted by that.

"Really?" he asked, a goofy grin on his face.

"Yes. Because they're attached to you. *If* you're going to stay, you're going to tell them that you won't be available all the time and that they can't expect you to be."

Clark nodded eagerly, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"Is your life really that boring?" he asked, but was sort of, annoyingly enough, glad Clark was back to help him wrangle his kids.

"I don't think that's something that should be coming from you, Mister Millionaire," Clark shot back.

"Billlionaire, actually. More zeroes," Bruce reminded him, and had to admit to himself that Clark smiling at him was sort of enjoyable.

"Ah, Master Clark," Alfred said, appearing from the elevator. "Perfect timing. Dinner is ready to be served upstairs in just a moment."

"Did you know about this?" Bruce asked, pointing to the grinning Clark. Alfred was nonplussed.

"Yes, Miss Cassandra informed me we'd be having a guest over. Lovely flowers, Master Clark. Shall I put them in a vase for Miss Cassandra?"

"Thank you, Alfred," Clark said, conceding his flowers to Alfred, who bowed his head to Clark slightly, before taking off. Clark offered to

help him up the stairs, and Bruce swatted his hands away but was, unceremoniously, picked up. Immediately he punched Clark, forcing him to drop him. Bruce's ribs twinged with pain, but he landed on his feet, and held a warning finger up to the reporter's shocked nose.

"One more stunt like that, and you're out on your ass again, Mister Kent," he said very firmly.

"Just trying to help!" Clark exclaimed in his defence, holding his hands up in surrender.

Why do you push people away when they are trying to help? Trying to assisst? Trying to understand you? Diana had yelled.

Bruce grunted and walked up the stairs, not mentioning Clark's hand coming to support his elbow whenever his breathing got particularly hard.

"Kids!" he called when they came into the entrance hall and could see into the sitting room by the kitchen where all of them were sitting, waiting for dinner. "Guess what? You've all got extreme puppy-faces, and I cave too easily."

That made their heads turn in confusion just around the time when Bruce and Clark stepped into the sitting room. Their reactions were pretty heartwarming, he had to admit.

"Clark!" Jason exclaimed happily, tossing his book and flying over the couch with Tim scrambling after. Dick literally jumped out of the chandelier to get to the reporter, and Clark laughed at all their antics as they attacked him. Damian howled like he'd been gravely betrayed when his three brothers crowded around Superman's legs, and toddled over to smack them angrily.

"My Cla'! My Cla'!" he shouted at the stop of his lungs in English, and didn't quiet down in the least until Clark had bent down to pick him up, cradling Tim's head against his leg with his free hand.

"Don't shout, Dami, I'm right here," Clark chuckled, and showered the whiny toddler with kisses until he was back to pretending he didn't like Clark one bit, when in fact, he would refuse to be let down on the ground for the rest of the night.

Bruce watched his children fawn over Clark for maybe another minute, before he was being dragged into a game. Damian smiled a victorious smile over Clark's shoulder at his father, who sighed to

himself but smiled back.

It would be a while before they could be alone. The children didn't trust Bruce anywhere near Clark now, fully convinced a few minutes with their guardian would drive him off again. During dinner, Clark would be sat down furthest away from Bruce, which he thought was sort of ridiculous, but he knew his children thought he deserved the treatment. For now, he let them have their fill of Clark's attention.

He settled down in an armchair and let Clark have his own fill, too, and soon felt Cassandra's presence behind his shoulder.

"He stays?" she asked, and when Bruce grumbled out a yes, she smiled, and kissed his forehead reverently. He liked it when she wasn't mad at him.

"Why do you care so much about Clark staying here, anyways?" Bruce asked as she perched on the armrest.

"Makes you happy. Less grumpy. Like that," she beamed at him, and Bruce grumbled again.

"If you would all take your seats," Alfred said from the doorway, and Clark herded the boys away into the dining room, Cassandra helping Bruce up out of his chair with ease.

Chapter End Notes

> Diana will kick anyone's ass if a child she likes asks her to. No doubt. Even Bruce's. Especially Bruce's, actually.
> Also Damian calling Bruce 'baba' when he's sleepy or hurt is a headcanon I enjoy a lot, alright? Him saying 'father' all the time is a nice character quirk but baby Damian hasn't been trained into saying that yet, okay?
> Also, thank you for all the support and the kudos??? Holy shit over 850???? my dudes. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!! <3<3

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After that, Bruce relented. However annoying, his children went back to being sweet and mostly happy now that Clark was back, and Clark still went to work like always, but sometimes came back for lunch.

Clark knew and accepted that Bruce was normally a very private person, and he knew the brooding billionaire needed some time to think on his own. Other people were distractions and possible hurdles to getting where he wanted, and Clark really didn't want to be a hurdle.

Clark wanted to be a good friend and respect boundaries, so he went home to sleep in his own bed every night, as well as tried to stay at the office long enough that he was almost always skidding in just a minute before they sat down at the dinnertable, to try to give Bruce some breathing space and still help out when he was needed. Tim was the first to notice him flying into his assigned guest room early in the morning, and when he asked why, Clark explained to him. Tim nodded in agreement.

"I'm happy as long as you come back," he said, holding his arms up to be picked up.

And that was that.

In those two days, Superman had to rescue a sinking boat, and battle Lex. He sat the kids down after he'd come back to discuss with them that he was busy with saving the world, and the boys looked at Clark like he was lucky he was pretty when they pointed out they'd all saved the world a couple of times, and that they understood and were mature and responsible.

That argument was ruined when Tim slapped his bright blue slime on Jason's neck not five minutes after that, of course, and Bruce and Clark had to prevent a murder, but still, a surprising show of maturity for a few moments.

Other than that, they managed to keep up with the kids pretty well

together. Bruce felt kind of like a housewife without the housework, getting Damian handed over to him every morning before Clark went off to work again. Dick saw the resemblance too, and made a joke about it, to which Bruce replied

"In that case, I want a divorce. I'm taking the kids", and Clark laughed and said

"I'll do anything to keep them. We just need counselling to work out the kinks."

"It's not the kinks I'm worried about, those are fine," Bruce said, which confused everyone but Jason, who cackled, and made Clark blush.

Alfred had let out a small, mirthful snort, which made Bruce once again be reminded that Alfred was trying to set the two of them up. It had been two days since Clark came back then, eight days since The Incident.

Now, it was Thursday, nine days since The Incident, and Bruce was sitting in the cave, the boys playing with him upstairs. Damian was napping, and Bruce had the baby monitor standing right next to his hand on the panel. Alfred was walking around behind him, picking up toys and generally just lingering. Obviously for a reason.

"Yes, Alfred, what is it?" Bruce asked when he was able to take a break from finding the thread in Spoiler's haphazardly thrown-together report on a new drug possibly hitting Gotham.

"May I present a theory, master Bruce?"

"About Clark, I presume?" Bruce sighed as Alfred came to his side.

"Indeed, Sir. When he's here, master Damian is essentially attached to his hip, most probably since Master Clark listens to his every whim. When Master Kent has Master Damian, Master Richard doesn't have to concentrate on him, and when he can play with his younger brothers, he manages to calm Master Jason to the degree that he only snaps and snarls, rather than shouts. Master Timothy, since he is no longer being harassed by Master Jason's temper, can be more relaxed, and speak up a little louder. When Sir doesn't have to manage all four of them at the same time, Sir manages to be polite and kind and an even better father," Alfred said calmly.

"You're saying that without Clark, the fragile balance is unsettled? That's nonsense."

"I'm just stating an observation of mine, Sir. You draw your own conclusions."

"Just an observation?" Bruce echoed. "No. It's not Clark specifically, and I'll prove it to you," he decided, pulling up a list of people he had thought of contacting since Clark had told him about his mostly successful lunch with his clone.

His sons were surprisingly social, and had an abundance of friends in their respective teams and social circles, as well as boyfriends and girlfriends. Or at least, he was pretty sure. He knew for sure Tim and the clone were an item, had been for a while now, but he wasn't entirely sure who Dick and Jason were dating. Damian, he was pretty sure only had two friends, so he had trouble seeing him with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

After having found a young, half-naked Dick and Starfire in the batmobile, he had sort of stopped trying to investigate their romantic relationships. Since they mainly interacted within the superhero community anyways, and had it instilled that the Mission goes before everything, he wasn't all that worried. Besides, you could tell who his sons were dating by who stuttered and cowered when placed in Batman's presence.

"You seek to prove me wrong by bringing in more superheroes? I'm sure that will go splendidly, sir," Alfred said, in that deadpan tone that Bruce knew was extremely sarcastic.

"People they love as older versions of themselves, actually. Same as with Clark. It's not him *specifically*, just people they enjoy spending time with when they're older."

"Ah, bringing in Mister Kent Junior, I see. And Roy Harper? Bold. I suppose you're not calling anyone in for Master Damian's entertainment?" Alfred said, looking over his shoulder at the list. Bruce raised an eyebrow.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"The boy is prideful. I can't think of a single person he'd want to spend time with in his altered state who would not mock him ceaselessly for it afterwards, Sir. Except-"

"Clark. Right," Bruce interrupted, nodding in acquiescence at Alfred.

"No one for Master Richard, either?" Alfred asked, a little surprised.

"What about Mister West?"

"I have an extreme amount of patience," Bruce said calmly, "which I need to use for the rest of the children. If Wally were to show up, I would run out of patience very, very quickly."

Alfred hummed.

"I suppose you're right, Sir."

"Besides, Dick loves everyone. He's friends with Roy, Clark, and loves all of his brothers. I don't think he needs anyone else here to enjoy himself."

"I'm sure you're doing what's best, Sir."

"Why does that sound sarcastic?" Bruce snapped, and Alfred's eyebrows raised minimally.

"It wasn't intended to be. I believe the manor could use a little fresh blood. The boys can only watch so many cartoons and take so many walks before they want to do something much more dangerous for fun. This may very well diffuse the situation. I believe you're handling the situation well, Master Bruce," he said reassuringly. Bruce let out a deep breath through his nose.

"Right."

"Baba?" came Damian's whisper from the baby monitor, and Bruce ran both hands over his face, looking over at the repaired suit in it's case. He sighed wistfully once, and then got up with help from Alfred, heading for the elevator.

"Don't know why he thinks these work like walkie-talkies," he muttered to himself as he took the elevator up to the study.

Saturday morning saw Bruce and Clark sitting on the veranda, reading a newspaper each and sipping coffee and tea in companionable silence. Bruce was glad that Clark was one of those people that could enjoy silence and not feel like he needed to fill it with meaningless chatter.

For once, the two of them were up before the kids. Clark was keeping a distant ear on them and their breathing patterns, but so far, it was

too early for them. It was nice, though. He liked just being with Bruce.

Bruce reached out for his cup of tea, and Clark his coffee, and their fingers brushed. Bruce felt the sizzle of Clark's skin against his and nearly startled, but he was Batman, so he settled for looking up to make sure he was really grasping the cup.

Clark noticed the odd gesture but not the meaning, of course, and smiled at Bruce, eyebrows a little furrowed.

"Shaky today?" he questioned.

"I'm fine," Bruce said automatically, and Clark huffed.

"If you say so," he said, giving Bruce an odd look before turning back to his newspaper.

Bruce, on his end, was having a small panic incident.

The last time he'd really felt that sizzle of possible body chemistry was when Talia had traced a finger down his chest, looking up at him with her beautiful green-brown eyes. That had been years ago. Over a decade ago, even. He knew better now.

Or should, at least.

Bruce had trouble connecting with other people, that much was sure. The only people who had ever liked him were his kids, and even then, their love was definitely not unconditional. That was fine. He and his children had been put through some very excruciating conditions through the years, and come out on the other side, alive and whole, but never well.

But Clark. What a mystery. Not a real man, but a better man than himself. Not of earth, but loved earth more than him. They had worked hard to get to this place, where they could speak without words and Bruce could express concern and worry as well as let down his guard a little around him. It was a bit of a relief, really. He'd wrapped himself up in so many layers, sometimes he forgot how to breathe, but Clark was good at letting him sit down, listen, breathe.

"Hmmm," Bruce said to himself, and picked his tea up.

Soon enough, their peace and quiet would be disturbed by Jason breaking a vase and none of the boys tattling on him until bribed with sweets, but for now? Bruce looked over at his best friend, bathed in

morning sunlight, hair tousled with sleep, and let himself feel that particular thrum of endless possibilities underneath his skin.

That whole day, Bruce watched Clark's interactions with the children out of the corner of his eye. Yes, the children loved Clark, but why?

He listened to them, for one. Even when Damian was practically babbling nonsense about farm animals or Titus, he nodded and made agreeing noises a little bit here and there, as well as asking Damian questions about his favorite animals, why he thought zebras had stripes. Stuff Bruce wasn't all that good at.

Sure, he could get along with kids, and raise them right, but that degree of managing innocence and encouragement, he'd never really managed with a straight face. Children old enough to talk coherently were easier to manage because they could usually be reasoned with, but children Damian's age were hard to handle for him. They couldn't be talked into silence or agreement. They just did whatever their little hearts desired.

Tim and Dick were trying out Tim's electric car, and Jason was back to reading his book, but in the kitchen, since Alfred was making biscuits, and Jason wanted to snag some while they were still hot. Clark was in the library with Damian, because he had wanted to read for him, but Damian was impatient and bad at staying still, and preferred drawing to listening to nonsense, otherwise known as English, and Bruce needed to listen.

He didn't have a lot of cameras in the Manor. Mostly out of caution. Sometimes the capes didn't stay in the cave like they were supposed to, mostly when tired teenagers and young adults strayed out to eat something before collapsing somewhere in the manor. Best not to catch that on tape, really.

So there he was, standing in the doorway to the library, watching Clark and Damian drawing whilst sitting on the floor.

"Are you like this when they're older?" Bruce questioned, and Clark looked up at him.

"Well I don't drop by as often, I guess," he said distantly as he made a little spit-curl on Damian's forehead with a grin. "I see Tim pretty much all the time whenever I go to the farm, and Dick calls occasionally. I would like to be better, but they'd probably not be as

appreciative of it as adults as they are now. Besides, Damian hates me when he's older, and-"

"No," Bruce said decisively. Clark stopped, looked up at him.

"No?" he questioned, looking gobsmacked.

"He really likes the drawing-journal you got him the last time you were in Nepal. He keeps it in his nightstand with his other few loved possessions. He doesn't hate you," Bruce said with a shrug.

Clark stared for a moment and then smiled brightly.

"Like father, like son," he nodded, almost to himself, and Bruce frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Big heart, trouble showing love. Sounds like someone I could name," Clark smiled, and Bruce rolled his eyes. Damian tapped Clark to get his attention. Another thing Damian didn't do to anyone but Clark. Everyone else, he just yelled at or hit. Clark got a tap.

"**That's a very pretty drawing, Damian. Is it a lion?**" he asked in Farsi. Damian nodded. "**Do you know what sound a lion makes?**" Damian considered that, and then meowed. Clark chuckled. "**Not exactly, but they are big cats! Good. No, they roar. Bruce, let's hear a roar.**"

Damian looked at his father expectantly, and Clark looked at him too. Bruce gaped.

"I'm not going to roar like a lion, Kal," he told Clark.

"C'mon, B. It's fun," Clark pointed out. Bruce sighed and sank to the floor in front of Damian, who kept looking at him attentively. That got him. He roared, decidedly not at full volume, and Clark frowned.

"No, Bruce, like this," he said, and offered a roar of his own. Damian burst out laughing. Bruce looked over at his little toddler, and smiled to himself.

"**You like it when he roars?**" he murmured, picking Damian up. The toddler kept giggling, grabbing a hold of his dad's arms to steady himself up in the air.

"**Roar, baba, roar!**" Damian laughed, and Bruce roared, much to

Damian's delight. Clark roared too, and Damian laughed so hard it seemed he was gonna choke.

"You're so weird," Jason announced from the doorway, holding a platter of newly-made cookies with the most skeptical look a ten-year-old could contort their face into. "Like, epic levels of weird."

"Well, if I wasn't weird, I'd be lame, wouldn't I? We can't have that," Bruce argued as he set Damian down to cool off. He was still giggling, and when Clark tickled his stomach, Bruce honestly thought Damian was going to combust.

Jason made a face like he agreed, and took a cookie off the plate.

"Alfie said lunch's up," he said, mouth full of cookie, and Bruce rolled to his feet, not noticing the way Clark's watchful blue eyes followed the movement.

"What's for lunch, then?" he asked as Clark picked Damian up and got up.

"Soup. Your favorite," Jason said.

"No cookies before food," Bruce said, holding his hand out for the platter.

"Nuh-uh. Alfred said I could have them!" he said loudly. "Back off, Mister."

"I doubt that, Jason," Bruce said, who hadn't been allowed to eat dessert before any large meal under this roof in his life, not even as an adult. "Don't go around snagging cookies and telling lies."

"I'm not!" Jason protested as they made their way down the hallway, and Bruce raised his eyebrow at him. It took a while, but Jason relented. "They smell real good, alright? And you can't stop me from eating them!"

"You're gonna puke if you eat all of them at once and then eat lunch," Bruce pointed out as Jason crammed another cookie in his face.

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yeah-uh. Give it to me," Bruce said, reaching for the plate right as Jason ran off. Bruce sighed. "Yeah, he's gonna puke. Great."

"Why are you so sure?" Clark questioned.

"Jason likes to prove himself when he doesn't have to. This isn't the first time this has happened," Bruce answered.

When Jason met them in the dining room, he had proudly stuffed his face with all the cookies, and was already digging into the soup. Bruce ate pretty fast, because he definitely saw Jason going greener and greener. Thankfully, so did Alfred, and was able to save their expensive carpeting with a well-placed trashcan once the inevitable happened.

Dick screamed, Tim decided that being *on top* of the table was safer than under the table in this situation, and Damian was entirely unperturbed by everything happening. Thankfully, Cassandra was with Stephanie over the weekend, because she really didn't like people vomiting.

Of course, neither did Bruce, but he'd sat through his fair share of influensas and poisonings. He had, just like with everything else he'd once found gross, become accustomed to it.

Jason was quickly moved to a nearby bathroom, and Bruce sat with him on the cold, tiled floor, stroking his back when he had to puke again.

"What did I tell you?" he murmured lovingly as he brushed Jason's hair back. Jason made a little sobbing noise, and Bruce stroked his back gently. "Too much, too fast, Jaybird."

Jason just leaned against the toilet seat, and Bruce chuckled to himself.

"What's so funny?" Jason asked, sounding small.

"Nothing, Jase. Just sort of forgot this was in my job description, still," he said, letting himself smile at Jason's peeved look. Damian was too independent and adult to ever do anything like this. He smoothed out Jason's red t-shirt over the shoulders, and rubbed circles into his back. "Think you could drink some water?"

Jason shrugged, but Bruce still called Clark's name silently, and he appeared with a glass of water in the doorway.

"How you doing, Jason?" Clark asked, crouching by the two, and Jason made a gagging noise, before spitting into the toilet.

"Maybe I'm not dumb all the time?" Bruce suggested as he held the

glass up to Jason, who took a sip, swished it around in his mouth, and spit it out into the toilet.

"Most of the time," he stated before taking a bigger sip of water.

"Ah, see? Practically back to normal already," Bruce said, and Clark smiled at the two of them, before brushing Jason's hair back like Bruce had done only moments before, with the same concerned look on his face.

After that little misshap, Jason perked up again pretty quickly, and Bruce almost missed that little vulnerable moment they managed to have. Jason was so rarely sick nowadays, only hurt, and when he was injured, he was just angry usually. Seeing Bruce never made it any better. He had missed Jason trusting him to take care of him like that.

At least they were having visitors today. That would surely distract all of them so that Bruce could think in peace.

Speaking of, he was locked up in his study, trying to do some WE work that Tim would've done for him if he'd been his original age, when he heard yelling from outside. Oh boy.

Bruce rose from his desk, and crossed the room to look outside, in the corridor. Jason was practically dragging Tim along after him, and when he spotted Bruce, he pointed a demanding finger at him.

"We're putting a bell on Timmy!" Jason yelled. "He nearly made me shit bricks when he snuck up behind me and asked what I was doing. For the *eleventh time*."

Bruce had to restrain himself from laughing, because Tim's cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, and the pouty look was new, however sweet. He stepped out in front of the two, and put his hands on his hips, waiting for Tim's explanation.

"It's not my fault!" Tim hurried to say, sounding sullen. "I'm small and light, unlike you!"

"Don't yap at me, Timbo. I'll deck ya."

"Hey," Bruce said sharply, but they weren't listening to him anymore.

"No, you won't!" Tim said, rolling his eyes, and honestly, what seven-

year-old had advanced enough humor to roll their eyes? "Because then I'll tell on you!"

Jason put Tim back on his feet only to try to shove him to the ground.

"*Jason*," Bruce growled, catching Tim with one hand and stretching after Jason with the other one. No dice. Jason was too quick, dashing down the hall and turning into another hallway. Bruce sighed. He'd deal with him later.

"Jason's so *mean*," Tim said, and he sounded genuinely upset now, and when Bruce turned to look at him, his eyes were tearing up, and his lower lip getting wobbly. Bruce quickly crouched in front of the upset child.

"You know he doesn't mean it," he hurried to soothe. "He just doesn't like it when you sneak up on him, and you know that, Tim. We've talked about it."

Tim sniffled and swiped at his eye with his red sleeve. Bruce looked to the high heavens in distress, and then trapped Tim in his embrace.

"You know better than to antagonize your brother, Tim. At least that one," he said patiently, looking Tim squarely in the eye. Tim squirmed a little in his arms, but nodded reluctantly. "Good. Now grab a cookie from the kitchen and go find Dick. I'm sure he won't mind you hanging around. Okay?"

Tim nodded again, this time a little more happily, and when Bruce released him, Tim disappeared almost immediately down the hall.

"Good parenting there," came Clark's voice from the doorway to his left, and Bruce stood up, turning to look at him slowly.

"Need a lesson or two?" he asked, and Clark almost winced.

"Maybe."

"I'd say maybe... Five before you have any kids. Oh, wait," Bruce said, and Clark winced this time, really winced. Bruce didn't find any joy in it.

"Ouch," Clark said, and laughed a little unsteadily.

"You should talk to him more, you know," Bruce said, brushing his shoulder against Clark when he walked by to soften the blow of his

words. Clark liked comfort through touch. "He's a good kid, despite his anger issues and how irresponsible he is."

"He's a teenager, they're all like that," Clark protested as he followed Bruce down the hall.

"I've had five teenagers, Clark. I know what teenagers are like. My teenagers are allowed to be like that because they don't have super powers that spin out of control when they aren't paying attention," Bruce said patiently as he watched the scuffing in the pattern on the carpet. Thank Alfred and his incessant vaccuming for smooth carpet hairs rubbed the wrong way by little wayward, scrambling feet.

"You don't understand. Kon was-"

"-Created without your knowledge by your enemy, without your permission? No, you're right, Clark, how could *I* possibly understand, of all people?" he drawled without taking his eyes off the carpet, and Clark froze in his tracks.

"It's different," he pressed.

"No, it's not. You just dealt with it worse," Bruce scoffed.

"That's not fair."

"At least your unexpected child wasn't ready to kill anyone over the slightest offense. A little more hand-holding instead of hand-smacking in the beginning, and he could've become much more manageable. Conner, I mean. We're lucky Tim and Bart got their hands on him before Lex did."

Clark was about to reply to that, but then they arrived at Dick's cracked open door, and Bruce knocked before nudging it further open.

"Yeah?" came Dick's voice in reply. Bruce opened the door to find Dick on his bed, more accurately hanging from the sturdy canopy. Bruce took one look around the room, and then looked up at the ceiling with a huff.

"Could Jason come out from under the bed please? You're going to apologize to Tim and you're going to mean it, chum," he said, and Dick gave him a faux innocent look.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and Bruce lifted the

skirt of the bed and reached under it, only for Jason to roll out on the other side and get to his feet, doing an impressive flip over Bruce's head and running past Clark out the door.

"You'll never catch me aliiiive!" Jason hooted at the top of his lungs as he disappeared down the hall. An exasperated smile appeared on Bruce's face for 0.4 seconds, and Clark only caught it because he was looking right at him when it happened. The smile made Clark's insides feel warm and gooey.

"Jason!" Bruce called, sounding exasperated as he slowly got back to his feet. "My ribs are bruised. Are you gonna make me chase you with hurt ribs? You know how that sucks."

It took a while, but after a few minutes, Jason's teal-eyes peeked around the corner, and Clark grabbed him before he could get away again, tossing the ten-year-old over his shoulder. Jason wriggled and tried to get away, but Clark held him firm, and Bruce raised his eyebrow at him.

"Let's go give Tim that apology, chum."

"I've been bamboozled!" Jason exclaimed incredulously. He pointed at Dick. "Traitor!"

"I didn't say anything!" Dick protested, now with his legs tangled up in the canopy artfully, like he was still in the circus. "It's all on you, Jaybird."

"Snitches get stitches, Dick-hole!" Jason called after him as they left the room.

"We've talked about appropriate language, Jason," Bruce said warningly, and Jason crossed his arms over his chest and pouted like hell all the way down to the kitchen, where Damian was drawing by the kitchen table and Tim was eating a cookie.

"Go on," Clark said, putting Jason down on the ground. When Jason steadfastly wouldn't budge, Bruce nudged his shoulder.

"Don't be like that. You're in the wrong," he reminded him. "That means you apologize."

Tim looked at them with big eyes, still chewing his cookie. Jason stared back for a moment, until Tim picked up a cookie, and held it out to Jason.

"Fine. I'm sorry I pushed you, punk," Jason said roughly, snagging the cookie from Tim's hands. Bruce was going to reprimand him for the 'punk', but Tim looked happy enough, and he patted the chair next to him. Jason climbed up onto the chair, and was handed a piece of paper and a couple of crayons.

"We're drawing birds," Tim told him, and Jason nodded and picked up the crayons.

Honestly, sometimes kids had better methods of dealing with each other than adults did.

"Hmmm," Bruce said to himself, looking over Tim's shoulder. He felt his face cracking into a smile before he could stop himself. "Nice robin you've drawn there."

Tim looked up at him with a big, happy smile.

"You think so?" he asked shyly.

"It's very good," Bruce affirmed, and Clark burst out laughing. When Tim's smile dropped, Clark hurried to reassure.

"I'm not laughing at your robin, Tim, it's a very good robin. A robin drawn by a Robin. That's what I'm laughing at," he said, and Tim squinted like he was back to believing adults were actual idiots. Clark muffled his next giggle behind his hand, and Bruce huffed out a breath of amusement himself, and shook his head at Clark.

The doorbell rang two hours before dinner, and Bruce was lying down in one of the ground floor sitting rooms at the time. Damian was in his lap, the other three were somewhere else in the house, hopefully not killing each other. He just wanted a quick nap.

He hadn't slept all that well, last night. He was almost 90% sure he could diagnose Damian with night terrors. He'd been woken up by his thrashing and yelling, and woken the toddler up, ready to comfort him when Damian had only grumbled at him and saying he didn't want to wake up. He didn't seem to remember anything, even though he'd been screaming his head off just moments before.

So now, Damian was completely unbothered, whilst Bruce was trying to take a nap.

However, their visitors arriving meant he had to get up and explain the situation to everyone. Sigh.

Whilst on his way there, he heard the clashing of metal against metal, and suspiciously turned towards the noise when his two oldest sons came crashing out of the room to his left, laughing.

"Hey! What have I said about swordfights with actual swords?" Bruce yelled after them as Dick and Jason dashed into the entrance hall, giggling. They both skidded to a stop by Alfred, Dick bumping into him and Jason bumping into Dick, getting an elbow in his ribs.

"Ow!" he yelled as Bruce came into the entrance hall, Damian now clinging to his neck with a grin on his baby face.

"We have visitors, Master Bruce," Alfred relayed, and Bruce let out a relieved breath as he grabbed the swords out of the childrens' hands with one hand, supporting Damian's bottom with his other so that the child wouldn't strangle him.

"Visitors?" came Tim's silent question as he appeared mysteriously from somewhere around Bruce's ankles, and Bruce honestly had to admire how silent Tim could be when he wanted to. He understood why that peeved Jason so much.

"Don't hit your brother," Bruce chided as he tugged the angry Jason away from Dick, tucking him under the arm holding the swords effortlessly. Not the best for his ribs, but sometimes you had to sacrifice your ribs to keep your kids alive and well. "And yes, visitors."

"Tim!" came Kon's shocked gasp from the open front door, and Tim jumped almost a foot in the air, and disappeared behind Bruce's legs.

"Oh my god," Roy chuckled, grinning from behind him. "Oooh, this is so bad."

"You know how you're all much older than you look?" Bruce asked his children pointedly, and got a tiny nod from Tim, an upside down angry pout from Jason, and a smile from Dick.

"Yeah, B, what about it?" he asked cheerfully. Since Bruce currently had no hands free, he pointed the two swords towards the scruffy archer and the teenager with a leather jacket and curly hair standing in the doorway. Alfred gently closed the door behind them and left.

"You know these two when you're older. Introduce yourselves," he said

to the visitors.

"I'm Roy Harper," Roy said, shoving his hands into his pockets with a grin. "I used to be your best friend, and now I'm *your* best friend." He nodded first towards Dick, and then Jason, who wrestled himself back onto the floor, squinting suspiciously at the redhead.

"Are we still friends, at least?" Dick asked worriedly, and Roy gave him a shocked look.

"'Course we are, Dickie. Why wouldn't we be?"

"Cool," Dick said happily, and picked Tim up from behind Bruce's legs and put him right in front of him instead. Tim squirmed uneasily at Kon's surprised staring.

"Conner!" Clark said, sounding surprised as he appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Clark? You're still here?" he asked incredulously as Clark took the stairs two at a time down.

"Yeah, I mean- I'm just helping Bruce with this bunch," he said sheepishly, plucking Damian from his father's back so that Bruce wasn't being strangled anymore. Damian grumbled, but scoffed unimpressedly at Clark as he wrapped a small hand in his flannel. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Batman called," Kon and Roy replied in unison.

"Wear street clothes, come through the front door, weird stuff like that, you know you gotta check it out," Roy grinned at Jason, who had gotten back on his feet again, crossing his arms over his chest. Tim moved a little closer to Jason, as if seeking protection now that Bruce didn't give any, and Jason was happy to provide, because he stood a little taller, looked a little angrier.

"Oh my god," Kon said, smacking both hands to his face. "He's so tiny. Tim is so tiny."

"He can hear you," Tim said, surprisingly loud for being tiny Tim around strangers, and frowning a little. Kon grinned as his hands slipped from his face again.

"Oh, this is so weird," he said under his breath, and crouched down to get on Tim's level. "Hi Tim."

"Who're you?" he asked suspiciously, but he had come out from behind Jason, attracted by that smile and bells of recognition ringing in the back of his head.

"I'm Kon. Older you's boyfriend," Kon smiled, and Tim's wide eyes became, if possible, even wider.

"I have a *boyfriend* when I get older?" he said, giving Kon a surprisingly appraising once-over.

"Sure do," Kon agreed. Tim stared critically at him, and took a lap around him.

"You're Superboy," he then stated, and when everyone gave tiny Tim incredulous looks, he stared back. "He and Clark look alike. Clark's Superman. Kon must be Superboy."

"Did you train Tim this young?" Clark whispered to Bruce, who shook his head, but was squinting a little at Tim.

"Older me's boyfriend is Superboy. Huh," he said thoughtfully. Then his eyes widened in realization. "Do we *kiss*?"

Kon laughed out loud.

"Oh, oh yeah we do, Tim. You bet we do."

"Huh," Tim said, but there was a blush rising on his cheeks.

"I'd give you a kiss now, but that'd be weird," Kon smirked. "How about a kiss on the cheek?" Tenatively, Tim stepped forward, until he had his hands on Kon's knees, and Kon kissed his soft cheek quickly, just a peck.

Tim flushed a bright, bright red, and ran and hid behind Bruce again.

Kon chuckled as he straightened up, and he was full out grinning until he met Bruce's eyes.

"Sorry," he said, holding his hands up in surrender. "He's just... Still very cute." Bruce gave him a steely glare, and Kon backed up a step.

"So, why are we here?" Roy asked, giving all kids that surprisingly smart look that came from being raised by a vigilante. Evaluating, calculating, but with a very Jason-esque relaxed posture, like he wasn't so much suspicious as considering things.

"Babysitting," Bruce said, and Jason gave a shocked and angry shout as Dick protested profusely about them not being babies, and despite Damian not knowing exactly what was going on, he too began making angry noises in solidarity. The only one not protesting was Tim, who was still staring at Kon and blushing.

"Listen to me!" Bruce said loudly, and all kids quieted down. "This is just as much for your protection as it is a gift. You like Clark, right?" All of them nodded. "Previous to this, he was only an ally of yours. These two are your best friends. Imagine how much you'll like them."

The kids, who had been watching him accusingly, turned heads to look at Roy and Kon critically.

"Oh boy. If there was ever any question that these little dudes are not the Robins, it's now been confirmed without a doubt," Kon said, looking sort of freaked out by having so many bat-glares on him at the same time, and chuckled a little nervously.

"This's so adorable, Jaybird, you're ten again!" Roy cooed.

"Shut up Roy," Jason said instinctively, and then looked over at Roy, a little surprised. Roy just grinned.

"Attaboy. So, you guys don't remember us?"

"Sort of, obviously, you egghead," Jason snapped, and Roy held his hands up.

"Cool your jets, hotshot. I have to send Kori a picture of you, she's not gonna believe her eyes," he laughed, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"This secret doesn't leave this house until the issue has been resolved," Bruce said, in his commanding, absolutely terrifying Batman-voice, which made Roy freeze up immediately, as well as Kon. His own kids didn't react at all.

"Right," Kon agreed.

"Since nobody knows who did this," Tim explained to Kon, who grimaced.

"Got nothing to go on?"

"No. Magic is annoying that way," Dick said with a smile and a shrug,

like this was only a minor inconvenience and not literally keeping him from his real life.

"Yeah, you're right. So, did you guys get any cool new toys?" Kon asked, and Tim nodded shyly.

"I'll show you," he said very seriously, and disappeared into the living room next to the entrance hall, Kon hot on his heels.

"I want a piggy-back ride," Jason demanded, eyes narrowed at Roy as though he didn't know if this was cool with them or not. Roy crouched for him.

"Well, at least some things haven't changed," he remarked as Jason hopped onto his back, piggy-back style. Bruce had honestly thought Jason would try to injure Roy before they became good friends again, but sometimes Jason surprised him. "Clone-boy's still following the Robin."

"And you're still my bitch," Jason said happily from where he had wrapped his arms around Roy's neck.

"I take offense to that, I'll have you know," Roy said, mock-angrily.

"Hurry, Roy, we have to beat them to the xbox," Jason said, urging him on.

"Right, sorry, bud," Roy said, hiking Jason up further on his back and following the other two. Dick snickered and made the sound of a whip, to which Roy made an offended noise, and ordered Jason to kick Dick, before they disappeared out of sight.

"Why did you call those those two?" Clark asked as soon as they were out of hearing range, looking bewildered.

To prove a point, Bruce thought.

"The kids could use the change in people so that they don't sneak out of the manor to see the real world. I know they're growing a little antsy. One time, whilst under house-arrest, Tim literally snuck into the trunk of Alfred's car when he was going grocery shopping. I don't want a reprise of that," Bruce said instead.

Clark chuckled.

"Seriously?"

"It was a very good trick, of course, but I can't have a seven-year-old Tim running around Gotham. He'll get recognized, questions will arise, police, etc. Can't risk it," Bruce stated firmly, thinking back. He'd been caught by Alfred, jumping out of the trunk too early and giving himself away.

"Not even a trip to the farm? Damian's been asking about the farm animals a lot," Clark said hopefully, and Bruce frowned.

"Sorry, Clark. It's too dangerous," he replied with a shake of his head. "Especially with Talia not liking you."

"What about the truce?"

"Sadly, that only extends to not trying to end the world or overthrow a country's government, not murdering you to get to our child, and anger me," he said with a shrug.

"I'll never understand the relationship you guys have going on," the reporter stated, eyes wide as he shook his head. Bruce shrugged.

"It's complicated," he agreed.

Chapter End Notes

A pretty long chapter as a sort of Christmas gift to those of you who celebrate, and a gift in general to everybody else! It's also because I'll be going on a trip and don't know if I'll have downtime enough to post/write in general!! Thanks for being patient and awesome, you're all amazing!
Happy holidays!! <3

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Heads up for minor blood and stuff, and also Clark and Bruce getting a little friendlier than usual. Not that friendly. Would you guys be into that or do you want this to remain teen and not mature? Let me know, I'd be ready to go both ways!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two teenagers had dinner with them, as well as Cassandra and Stephanie, and Bruce was reminded that while his children could be silent as mice, they were also capable of being louder than actual fire alarm sirens. Roy and Jason had taken to each other like fish to water, which wasn't in the least surprising, but Dick and Roy got on well too, which seemed to surprise the archer.

Sure, they were friendly, but they hadn't been interacting that much since they were Speedy and Robin. Now, however, Dick continuously made Roy laugh, and Roy beat Dick mercilessly at all the video games they tried, which only made Dick crow that Roy was a cheater.

Tim, meanwhile, had managed to wrap Kon around his finger immediately, by being literally a smaller version of himself and nothing else. Kon was just sort of thrilled he could pick this Tim up without him protesting profusely. Tiny Tim sort of liked it, even.

The teenagers handling the children left Bruce in peace to get his new batsuit fitted. Bane had managed to leave the last one in tatters, according to Alfred. He fiddled with the grapple guns, studied some cold cases, some of Tim's cases, some of Stephanie's cases.

The girls passed through the cave, hopping into suits and double-checking belts and grapple lines. Bruce watched Stephanie check hers, and considered having her do a test for him right then and there. Her shoulder was one of her weak-spots, always hurting, and it was the grapple arm. By the time he'd determined that he was going to make her show him her current grappling-technique, two bikes roared out of the cave.

Getting underneath the batmobile wasn't going to happen if he wanted his ribs to heal anytime soon, so Bruce was just about ready to go

back upstairs when he got a message from Batgirl about a stake-out she was doing tonight.

"You're not seriously going out, are you?" came Clark's voice from behind him. Bruce cast a glance over his shoulder at him and his accusing tone, and slipped his foot into his boot.

"I am," Bruce said, nudging the cape over his shoulders, a practiced, comforting gesture. His ribs were good enough that he could probably work up a sweat without them hurting too bad, and he'd just have to shield his stomach a little more than usual. He'd gone out way more injured than this before.

"Bruce. You're *hurt*," Clark said, his hand suddenly pressing down on his shoulder. Bruce pulled the cowl up, blinking into the bright lenses.

"Yes. That's on par for the course," Bruce said decisively, shaking Clark's hand off him and correcting his belt. Stupid Kryptonian warmth, seeping through seemingly everything. "Not everyone here is almost invulnerable."

"You go out, even if you're hurt?" Clark asked, sounding shocked, and Bruce turned to look at him, feeling a little incredulous. Ten years, and the man still didn't seem to grasp the extent Bruce would go to protect his city. This wasn't even all that bad.

"Kal, if I stopped going out just because I'm a little hurt, I'd never leave my house. There's always *something*. I've been recovering for a few days, I know my limits."

"What does Alfred think about this?" Clark demanded after a moment of silence, crossing his arms over his impressively broad chest.

"It doesn't matter, since I'm not a child," Bruce snapped back, and took off for the batmobile.

"At least ask one of the girls to back you up!" Clark called after him. "If you break a rib, I'm not coming to get you!"

"I don't need you to!" Bruce replied, turning on his tuner to get that to come out in the Batman growl before hopping into his car and getting out into the night.

He'd just taken down a few thugs trying to rob a jewelry store, when he heard boots on the rooftop above him.

"Batwoman," he called when he saw the swish of bright red, and the figure on top of the building slowed down, and leaned against the edge.

"Batman. I've noticed Gotham's pretty empty right now. Where are the birdies?" Batwoman called, her red hair flying in the wind.

"Incapacitated," Bruce stated, grappling up to stand next to her. If he didn't have to shout, he wasn't going to.

"How?" she asked, tapping her cowl a little distantly and taking a step back from him. She had a knife-slash on her thigh that was still bleeding a little sluggishly, but otherwise she seemed fine.

"Need-to-know."

"Right. Of course," she said, tapping her wrist this time. "Got perps I'm looking for. Maybe you've seen them? Or some of the others have?"

"Names," Bruce said, tapping his own wrist. She tossed out a few names he recognized, some the girls recognized, and a few the batcomputer recognized. They traded information, Batwoman telling him that Penguin was going for a large diamond in Gotham City Museum, one believed to bring fortune and prosperity to anyone holding it.

"Good?" Kate asked tersely when he downloaded the files she'd sent him. Bruce shot his grapple, and Batwoman took off running again, breaking the tracker he'd planted on her when she'd gotten four blocks away. Faster than last time. Bruce could appreciate that.

He took one of the vents into the large building, and took down Penguins goons, luckily only leaving a few bullet-holes in the walls behind. He'd managed to strain a shoulder-muscle during the quick grappling inside the museum, which made dealing with six more goons a little more taxing than usual, but he wrapped the whole ordeal up quick enough.

"Status on Black Bat, Spoiler, and Batgirl," Bruce requested, and got expletives from Babs about her communicator chirping when she was trying to sleep, actual snoring from Stephanie, and nothing from Cassandra. "Black Bat? Come in."

Cassandra shushed him, and Bruce looked up where her communicator was located. Not at the manor, or Steph's apartment, or Babs' tower, so she wasn't sleeping.

"Two clicks if you need help, one if you're good," he asked, and got one click in reply. "B out."

Hopping into the batmobile, Bruce set his course for the cave, and decided to keep tabs on Cassandra. His daughter was better than his sons at asking for help, and she was a very good fighter. It was just a little unusual for her to stay out when Steph was asleep, and everyone was done for the night.

Once back in the cave, he tossed the cowl, gloves, and cape, but decided not to shower yet. Batman might have to come out again for Cassandra.

Instead, he sat down, and began typing reports, and browsing what Babs and Steph had been up to overnight. He heard Clark come down the cave stairs about half an hour later, and by then he was inputting the information Kate had given him into the system.

"How's your shoulder? And your ribs?" Clark asked softly from where he was standing by the bottom of the stairs.

"Strained my shoulder a little. Haven't been grappling for a while. Stephanie tends to do this all the time," Bruce admitted reluctantly, without turning around. "Ribs are fine. Not sleeping in Metropolis tonight?"

"Kids asked me to stay, since you were out. A little sore, maybe?" Clark offered. He didn't like that Bruce would go out, injured, and come back even worse for wear and just shrug it off, and Clark liked even less that he had no say about it. He'd just like to help his best friend a little. Bruce shrugged noncommittally before going back to typing out his report, and Clark saw his minor wince as his sore muscle pulled. The words were out of his mouth before he could really think it through. "Want me to give you a shoulder-rub?"

"I'll just ask-" Bruce began, but closed his mouth again, and considered that. Usually, he was the one chiding his children for hurting themselves and smoothing out their sore muscles, and if he ever needed it, they'd return the favor. Damian had a very strong grip for being so small.

But Clark. Bruce couldn't go to his children for the assistance now.

Cassandra, sure, but she was still out. Besides, she had trouble with long touches sometimes, and once she had accidentally paralyzed Dick's arm for a solid hour during a massage gone wrong. Cassandra was a little too good at pressure points. Clark was offering. "Fine."

Clark smiled and rolled his eyes.

"No, please, keep sounding like you're doing me a favor, not the other way around." His eyes fell on the little map and pinging dot on the screen to Bruce's left. "Is that Cassandra? Is she still out?" he asked lightly.

"Yes. She won't tell me what she's up to, and she doesn't seem to be on her way home soon, so I'm keeping an extra eye on her."

"Worried?"

"Not so much worried as... Concerned."

"Worried and concerned are synonyms, Bruce," Clark grinned. When he was finally standing behind Bruce and his chair, he tapped Bruce's upper-body armor. "This is gonna have to go."

"I don't know, should I be wearing it as a precaution?" Bruce teased, smiling over his shoulder at his long-time friend and companion, and Clark snorted.

"Yes, because during my 30-ish years on this earth, I haven't managed to control my strength," Clark said sarcastically, and Bruce huffed, before he tugged the top part of the armor over his head. Clark had to swallow twice to get rid of all of the saliva pooling in his mouth when his eyes got to roam Bruce's strong, muscular back.

Holy *crap*.

There was a big, paling bruise on the left side of his torso, over his ribs, and scars all across his back, some thin and small, some thick and jagged. There were some moles here and there, but all Clark could think about was the almost perfect triangle that scarred, strong torso made when Bruce leaned forward against the batcomputer panel.

Of course, Bruce noticed the staring, but not the intent. He just assumed Clark was shocked by the extent of his scars. Most were, really. He understood. Just assumed Clark had seen it before in the Justice League showers. Bruce himself had managed to get an eyeful once or twice there. He couldn't help it. He was naturally observant.

"Just because you don't scar doesn't mean others don't," Bruce remarked after Clark had been silent for over a minute, and Clark shook himself out of it, using his x-ray vision to see where Bruce had strained himself.

"No-I didn't- I mean-" Clark stuttered out, and then shook his head and pressed his fingers into Bruce's shoulder.

The other man groaned. Partly because it there was a sudden, uncomfortable, endorphin-encased burn in his muscles, and partly because Clark had very warm, very strong hands. It had just sort of slipped out. Internally, Bruce cursed, and pressed his lips together. "I just didn't know you had so many of them," Clark hurried to add.

"Yes, well..." Bruce's grunt was quieter this time, and Clark spread his fingers over Bruce's pale back, kneading with just enough pressure that Bruce had to take a moment to collect himself. This was a bit more gentle and nice than he was used to, but still with enough pressure being used that he felt like Clark was trying to turn his rock-hard muscles back into actual tissue. Sort of hard to concentrate when that was going on. "They tend to add up over the years."

"I guess you're right. What's this one from?" he asked, stroking with his thumb up Bruce's neck and swallowing hard. The scar was thin, curving around his throat from his collarbone and disappearing up into his hair. It was surprising he'd survived that.

"Sword. Ninjas," Bruce said shortly.

"From your trainee-days, or later?" Clark added tenatively, not really expecting an answer. Bruce didn't like to share. Clark just wanted to know everything he could about this amazing, impossible man. Bruce practically knew everything there was to know about Clark already.

As expected, Bruce stayed silent as Clark tried to rub the tension out of him. Bruce was, to his surprise, not as tense as Clark thought he was. However, he'd seen Bruce do impressive stunts that required some give, so he shouldn't be all that surprised. Clark assumed he was just shocked since Bruce always held himself like he was stiff as a board.

Now though, Bruce had practically melted into the panel, eyes closed, breathing regular and slow, for once seemingly relaxed. That made Clark's stomach flutter. That he could make Bruce feel safe enough to make him relax like this. Clark smiled to himself, and let his hands wander down Bruce's back.

He'd been with women who's waists he could nearly wrap his hands around. Clark's both hands barely spanned Bruce's back at waist-level, and he had pretty big hands. He was well aware of that. Clark had to swallow again.

"Did Superboy and Arsenal get home?" Bruce mumbled into the panel, and Clark bit his lip.

"Yeah, they headed home right around the time when the kids conked out," he murmured back. "Think they'd like to come back though. I think you'll need the help tonight."

"Metropolis thing, right?"

"Yeah," Clark agreed. It was a Clean Energy symposium, and he'd agreed on taking the article on months ago. Couldn't well back out now, without Perry roaring his ear off about it. Besides, he hadn't written anything that commanded attention lately, and he missed getting to talk to people that knew what they were doing, rather than writing puff pieces.

"Good. Could use some alone time."

"You need less alone time," Clark snorted.

"Not me, you," Bruce replied, cracking an eye open to look up at the reporter. Clark shrugged and rubbed against the sore spot again, making Bruce grunt and close his eyes again.

The detective hadn't really realized he was this tense. Generally, he wasn't too tightly wound, despite what others might say. You needed flexibility to be able to make as many acrobatic moves he did at this age, and the only times when Bruce got tightly wound was when he was stressed or his children were injured. He supposed he hadn't considered that taking care of four children, especially his own unique ones, could be so stressful for him. Younger children demanded more nurturing than his teenagers did.

Clark was effectively smoothing the stress out of his body, and making him feel pretty good whilst doing so. Usually massages meant beating the soreness out of muscles so that they'd be ready to go do the same thing again tomorrow. This was anything but. Bruce was a little too dazed to notice Clark's nervous, constant swallowing, and his dark eyes.

Both were too absorbed in the odd feeling in the air to hear Alfred's

approaching footsteps.

"Master Bruce, I- Oh." Clark jumped into the air with surprise, and Bruce, feeling surprisingly caught off guard, stood up, fast enough that the chair rolled backwards almost a foot. Clark hated to see the tension come seeping back into his best friend's body, and quickly dropped back down, and started blushing like they'd been caught necking, which was ridiculous. He'd just been helping his friend out.

"Yes, Alfred?" Bruce asked, his voice forcibly level. The reporter behind him cleared his throat a little nervously, and Bruce would have snapped at him to get over himself if it hadn't been for Alfred standing right there.

"Ah, I was just coming down to ask if the two masters would like something to eat before breakfast-time or if I could convince you to sleep a bit?" Alfred said just as calmly, but he had a glint in his eye that Bruce didn't like one bit.

"What time is it?" Bruce asked.

"Four in the morning, Sir."

"I'll just nap with Damian later," Bruce said with a shrug. "You should be sleeping though, Clark, you have that clean energy thing tonight."

"I napped with Damian earlier," Clark admitted with a smile. "It's so nice to have a napping buddy that small. He's just so warm and tiny, y'know? Hugs me like I'm a teddy bear."

"You should be glad he's that small. Any older and he wouldn't be this accepting of adults napping with him. Usually he'll only nap with Titus," Bruce said distantly, rubbing his shoulder distractedly. It *did* feel better now. His whole upper back did, in fact.

"Damian takes naps as a ten-year-old?" Clark asked, looking touched. Bruce smiled secretively.

"Well, he's a growing child who's up all night. Put him somewhere warm and horizontal and there's a pretty big chance he'll take a nap. Titus likes being his pillow," he replied. Clark made a soft humming noise like he would have squealed if he wasn't in male company.

"He would so stab me if he knew that I knew about that," Clark grinned. Bruce let out a short chuckle.

"Probably." Not a lot of people in the world could say Superman was cautious of upsetting their eleven-year-old so he wouldn't get stabbed.

"The sun will rise in a moment. Would the two masters like their tea and coffee served outside on the patio?" Alfred offered.

"Please," Bruce said distractedly, picking up one of Jason's red trucks from underneath the computerpanel. Their toys were to be kept on the sparring mats down in the cave, and yet, they always managed to make their way into places they shouldn't be. Sometimes Bruce marveled at children.

"Gotham does have very colorful sunrises and sundowns. That's a plus," Clark said to Alfred, who smiled pleasantly.

"It's all the pollution," Bruce stated in a deadpan, seeing Clark grab Shakira the lion off the floor, as well as Jason's Wonder Woman tiara. Dick's polka-dot sweater lay on the ground next to it, and he picked that up too. Clark looked a little shocked.

"Pollution is what colors sunrises?" he questioned as Bruce tossed him the truck.

"Essentially, yes. When you can see them, Gotham's are legendary," Bruce agreed. "I'm going to change out of the suit, and then I'll join you."

"Bring a tablet to keep track of Cass," Clark reminded him before disappearing towards the elevator, still with all the items in his arms. Tim would want Shakira, and Jason his tiara. Dick was always chilly in the mornings, and the easiest way to coax him out of bed was with a warm, promising sweater.

"Who's the one with the brains of this outfit here again?" Bruce called after him teasingly, and Clark laughed so loud the noise bounced against the cave walls. Instead of making it sound hollow, it made it all the warmer.

"That'd be you, B! Doesn't mean you have to remember everything all the time!" Clark called back, and then there was the rattle of the elevator doors closing. Bruce rolled his eyes fondly.

"Is Miss Cassandra still out, Sir?" Alfred asked, a hint of surprise in his voice as he glanced at the screen. Bruce shrugged.

"I did ask if she wanted assistance, but she turned me down. If she's

not home by nine, I'll go out looking," Bruce decided.

"Sound plan, Master Bruce. Would you be in the mood for coffee today, Sir, or shall I just make a cup for Master Clark?"

"I'd like a cup of that tea from that village in Iran if we have some left, actually," Bruce said, peeling out of his lower-body armor, and picking the top part up when Alfred gave him a particularly disappointed, pointed look.

"I do believe so, Sir." Bruce nodded, turned to leave for the showers, and then froze.

"Wait. Did you just..." He turned to point a finger at Alfred, who raised an eyebrow slightly, already holding a tablet to bring upstairs. "Did you just refer to Clark as 'Master Clark'?"

"It did sound like it, didn't it, Master Bruce?"

"Why would you? He doesn't live here."

"Could have bloody well fooled me, Sir," Alfred said swiftly. Bruce gaped incredulously at his butler, who gave a curt bow. "I'll be in the kitchen, preparing your pre-breakfast, if you need me."

And then he took the stairs up to the clock, and Bruce was left pursing his lips, looking after him.

As soon as the boys woke up, and breakfast had been eaten, they took a little walk around the grounds. It was shaping up to be a pretty warm summer day, and the boys begged to play in the pool, but that was even more exposed than the forest, and Bruce got antsy just thinking about it. Clark saw it, and suggested that they instead go play in the cave, since it was cooler than the manor.

The teenagers would arrive shortly before lunch, it had been decided, but until then, Tim and Jason were buzzing with so much energy that Bruce set them free on the jungle gym. Dick was, in general, always buzzing with energy, so he didn't protest in the least. Damian was perched on Clark's stomach like he was a flying carpet, much like Tim had been twelve days ago, as Clark circled the jungle gym in the air, ready to catch any especially adventurous children.

Finally, Cassandra's comm unit was on it's way back to the cave. Bruce

was almost about to suit up when he'd noticed she was making her way back, and he was relieved to hear the roar of her bike through the tunnels.

The kids slowed down enough to look as her bike skidded into the main area of the cave. Odd, but maybe she knew that her brothers were there and wanted to wow them. Not unusual. Dick had nearly scraped up his entire leg trying to impress his brothers when he was an adult, doing the same stunt.

Except then Cassandra practically fell off her bike, and Bruce felt the world slow to a stop when she pulled her helmet off. Her face is ashy pale, and she manages maybe two steps before a tremor rocks through her body. Cassandra spits blood as it drips from her nose, and Bruce's heart leaps as he watches her collapse to her knees.

"Clark!" he shouts, but Clark's read his mind, is already grabbing all the boys and flying upstairs as Bruce jams the panic button. He hurries over to Cassandra, sweeping her nearly limp body into his arms and carrying her to the medical ward.

She doesn't even have a scratch on her body, much less a head injury, and Bruce can't understand what's wrong until he sees two tiny nicks on her neck, where the skin is going yellow around the wounds.

Poison.

He's already halfway through his checklist on poisons he knows she's not immune to, trying to correlate symptoms, when Alfred comes striding through the door, immediately shooing Bruce away from her and taking over. His lips are a thin line as he shoots out questions rapid-fire at Bruce about her condition.

"Cassandra?" Bruce murmurs when Alfred is flipping through the cabinet behind them, trying to see if she's conscious yet. Her lips are going blue, and there's one single moment of clarity when their eyes meet, and then she's seizing. Bruce and Alfred's combined strength could hold her on her side, but after the seizing passed, she went slack and weak as a kitten.

"A combination of two poisons or more, at the very least," Bruce growled at Alfred as he shifted the now almost entirely limp Cassandra's head back onto the pillow.

"My conclusion as well, Master Bruce," Alfred said, as he took some of Cassandra's blood. "We shall make the testing quick then. We don't

know how long Miss Cassandra has been infected."

"I got it," Bruce said, taking the syringe from Alfred's outstretched hand as the butler began removing Cassandra's armor, and running into the lab part of the cave.

A few hours later and the combination of the three poisons Cassandra had been infected with had been determined. She had been injected with the anti-venoms for the respective poisons, and her pulse was becoming more and more normal. However, she was sweating through cold-spells, and trying to recover from poison was, in general, very hard on the body. Bruce knew this, so he gave her enough sedatives to knock her out, and took a shower before going upstairs to soothe his other kids.

Bruce can admit that he's blaming himself. He should have ignored her when she said she was fine. He should have gone out looking for her earlier. He shouldn't have assumed she was chasing down a lead or something. It was fucking six in the morning when he last checked up on her, and she was still out. He should have realized she wasn't fine.

The moment Bruce stepped out of the clock, he nearly tripped over something, and expected to find Titus blocking the way, as he had a tendency to do, and instead found it was Dick's legs he'd almost tripped over.

Conner was leaning his back against Bruce's desk, with Tim in his lap, talking to him as Tim solved his rubriks cube. Damian was sitting on his desk, carefully drawing a mustache on Clark's grinning face, and Jason and Roy were on the floor by the bookshelves, lying on their backs with their feet propped up against the bookshelves. They were tossing a ball between themselves, and Dick was lying right in front of the clock, playing a game on someone's phone.

"What are you all doing in here?" Bruce asked incredulously, and Dick immediately jumped onto him like a little frog as Tim crashed into his legs and Jason tugged on his arm incessantly.

"Is Cassandra okay?", "Where's Cassie?", "Can we see Cass?" the kids immediately shouted, and Damian began to wail Cassandra's name as Clark picked him up, ridiculous Sharpie mustache in place along with a worried frown.

Bruce fixed his reflex-like grip on Dick and got Jason to release his arm just so he could brush Jason's all-black hair back. He didn't miss the white strands one bit.

"We've given her antidotes for the poisons, so there's a high possibility she'll pull through," Bruce said, noticing his flat tone and not really feeling calm enough to fix it. Maybe he should've taken some time to collect himself, meditate a bit. This wasn't soothing his kids. He tried to grudge up some calming things to say, but it was the truth. He couldn't promise them Cassandra would live and then disappoint them.

Roy had rolled around to lay on his stomach, watching him warily.

"She might not?" Tim asked, eyes wide as saucers and decidedly tearing up.

"We don't know, Tim," Bruce said, swallowing as he stared down at Tim, clinging to his leg.

"Cassandra will be fine," Clark immediately said, coming up behind the boys and giving Bruce a slightly worried look. "She's very strong and capable. She's not going to let this get her. Alright boys?"

The boys glanced at Clark, and then up at Bruce again, who was staring at Clark's worried eyes. Damian wailed again, this time reaching out for Dick, who took him from Clark and wrapped his arms around the toddler, cradling him carefully.

"Hey, Jase, let's go play that shitty game you like," Roy said slowly from the other side of the room, rolling to his feet. Kon narrowed his eyes but followed his example, not liking the weird tension in the air. Very different tension from earlier today, Bruce noted distantly.

"Mario Kart isn't a shitty game just because you don't know how to play it," Jason fired back almost automatically, and Roy grabbed him underneath his arm to give him a noogie, except Jason kicked his knee down and slipped away.

"Sure it is. Hop on," Roy replied, reaching his hand out for Jason, who looked over at Bruce and Clark's staring match before climbing onto his friend's back.

"Tim, wanna show me your gameboy?" Kon asked, also rising, and Tim held his hands up for Kon.

"I'm gonna... Watch Jason beat Roy at Mario Kart," Dick mumbled before hurrying after the teenagers with Damian still in his arms.

As soon as they were out of the door, Clark grabbed his shoulder comfortingly.

"Hey, how's Cass doing?" he asked soothingly.

"Like I said. Antidotes have been administered. We don't know if she'll pull through," Bruce repeated, and Clark stared at him for a moment.

"You're freezing. Are you in shock?" Clark asked, grabbing Bruce's bare underarms, and Bruce batted him off.

"No. I know what shock is like and this isn't it," he growled, feeling rage simmering underneath his skin. Who was Clark to ask that? Hadn't experienced shock in his life. No no. Because Kryptonian bodies didn't believe in shutting down. "The cave is, as has been stated earlier today, cooler than the manor."

"How are you feeling?"

"Well, my daughter is dying and my sons have been magically turned into children. How would you estimate I'm feeling, Kal?" Bruce snapped, moving away from him to grab his tablet from his desk. He had recieved several work emails that were meant to go to Tim, so he internally composed a 'Fuck you, I'm on vacation' reply before plugging it in as the automatic message.

"Not very good, I'd wager."

"No Clark. Not very good. Unlike you, we don't shake off everything that's shot at us!" Bruce said, his voice climbing in volume until he was nearly yelling, and he knew he was just frazzled. Cassandra is the best of the best, could possibly beat him, even, if she really wanted to, and she doesn't get hurt very often. Whenever she does get hurt, it's always drastic. Clark held his hands up, signaling his surrender.

"I know you're scared, Bruce. She'll pull through. She's stubborn," Clark soothed, approaching the angry bat cautiously. "Don't worry."

"I'm not," Bruce snapped, and Clark wrapped an arm around Bruce's broad shoulders, setting the tablet back on the desk.

"I am," Clark admitted. "But it's Cass. If anyone can beat that, it's her."

"Damian is immune to the majority of poisons. Cassandra the majority, but a little less than him. Jason the majority, but a little less than her. If anyone could beat it, it'd be Damian," Bruce said in a monotone, not struggling in Clark's hold but also not reciprocating. Clark breathed in the scent of Bruce's expensive shampoo, but stopped himself from taking a deep breath. He needed to put being Bruce's best friend and partner before this silly crush.

"But Cassandra's next on the list," Clark urged. "Don't worry, B. Did she at least get the perps that did this?"

"Don't know. I'm going out," Bruce replied, and made to go when Clark grabbed his arm and pulled him back in.

"Not only is the sun high, but you're still injured, and why train all those kids to help you when you won't let them?" Clark said firmly, squeezing his tense shoulders and hating that Bruce probably wouldn't let him get his hands on them again today. He wouldn't allow himself any relaxation until Cassandra was out of the danger zone.

"Then I'm going down to sit with Cassandra," Bruce stated.

"Yeah, alright. But you need to eat dinner with them when I go to the clean energy symposium. Otherwise the kids will be really freaked out. You need to consider them too," Clark insisted, and Bruce took a deep breath, dragging his face over his hands.

Shouting at Clark wasn't going to help Cassandra get better. Finding out who did it would. He'd have to trace her comms and check corresponding security cameras to see where she might've been hit. If he found trace of the people who did this to her, he didn't care if it was brighter than two suns. He was going out, and he was going to break their bones.

"Right," Bruce acknowledged, but didn't promise anything. Clark sighed, but leaned against Bruce's desk and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Did you know that the one sibling all your kids love is Cassandra?" he asked, surprising Bruce with the sudden subject change.

"Did you not?" Bruce said, eyebrow raising despite himself.

"I just assumed it'd be Dick! Everyone loves Dick!" Clark exclaimed a little incredulously.

"The only one they all might actually listen to is Cassandra. The one they go to for comfort and advice is Dick," Bruce stated, and had to slow down when he heard the bitterness in his voice. "Cassandra's... Learning how to give comfort as she goes. Her little gestures of affection, kissing foreheads, stroking cheeks, with older Damian touching pinkies; it's as much a way of giving comfort as receiving it."

"She and Damian touch pinkies? That's... Actually pretty sweet."

"Well, he thinks anything else remotely affectionate is showing weakness, and I had to put a stop to them tackling each other to show affection. The least violent thing they came up with that didn't make Damian or Cassandra uncomfortable was touching pinkies."

Clark made a noise of acquiescence, nodding.

"I'm just glad she got home fast enough that you were able to rescue her."

"She's not out of the woods yet," Bruce pointed out. "Just, hopefully getting there.

"Yeah," Clark agreed, looking down at his shoes. "She'll pull through. You're resilient, you bats."

"That's only one of the many things we are," Bruce agreed, turning the clock to the right time and slipping into the welcoming, dark cave.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, but happy new year! Happy holidays!! Merry new beginnings!! I've been in LA and had a bit of a rough patch on the writing front, but I'm back on track now!
Thanks for all your amazing sweet comments and the kudos count being almost 1000????? My dudes that just makes my heart go !!! <3<3!!!<3
So yeah, thank you for being sweet and awesome, you're all stars. Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Without reassurance that their sister was going to be okay, all four boys were restless. Kon was good at handling restless, though, seeing as he was often restless, and managed to keep their attention for a whole hour just by racing them through the hallways. Sometimes, he was even bested by the little brats, who were undoubtedly not only brats, but also very much still bats.

He was seriously tripped right before the finish-line once by Dick and Jason, holding what looked like a yellow-golden rope between them. Whilst he fell hard onto the floor, Tim vaulted over the rope like a little acrobat, automatically rolling before getting right back to running. That was a move he saw Tim pull off all the time, but this little Tim barely seemed to know how to somersault, which lead him to think this was his Tim rather than Tiny Tim.

Batman *had* said they remembered some things, mostly muscle memory and balance stuff. Kon would've been much more hurt about Tim not remembering him if it hadn't been for him being so damn cute as a kid. Since he'd introduced himself though, there had been several times where Tim would react to him in very familiar ways.

Like when Kon had said a bad joke, and Tim had groaned and rolled his eyes. Or that time when Kon had said an even worse joke, one he knew older Tim found funny, and tiny Tim burst out laughing like he was never going to stop. *That* was a little unfamiliar, but it felt to Kon like fireworks were going off in his chest, hearing Tim's familiar laughter, just way higher pitched. He hadn't really reflected on how dark his boyfriend's voice was nowadays until it wasn't anymore.

Kon also noticed Clark constantly staring in the vague direction of the cave, where Batman was probably sitting, guarding Black Bat like a, well, guard dog.

When it was Roy and Dick's time to race each other, Kon decided to take the moment, and sit down by the demon-brat, or at least the toddler version of him. Since Tim was pretty much just a little less

mature and less scarred, he assumed tiny Damian was going to be like, well, a smaller Damian.

However, when he sat down next to Damian and Clark, who were sitting on a blanket in the hallway behind the start-mark, he wasn't greeted by a sneer or by getting bitten. He'd honestly sort of assumed that was what he'd get, but instead he got a confused look from the toddler, whose head whipped between looking at him and then Clark.

And then, tenatively:

"Cla'?" Damian asked, stretching his hands out toward him. Conner and Clark looked at each other in surprise, and then Clark burst out laughing.

"**No, Damian, that's Conner. He's my… Son**," Clark said in Farsi, hesitating. There wasn't really any easy way to explain what Conner was to a two year old in Farsi, so he didn't even try. Conner wasn't very good at any other languages than English, so he just waited with slightly furrowed eyebrows and a slight smile for Damian's judgment.

"Con'?" Damian tried, giving him a skeptical look. Yeah, that seemed more appropriate, coming from a baby version of Damian.

"Kon works," he agreed with a slight smile. The little brat was sort of cute, really. Damian gave a satisfied nod and then went back to his drawing. The kid's huge dog was asleep behind him, it's head resting on Clark's thigh. "Does that happen a lot?"

"Not really. He's a smart kid, just not really used to people looking like each other," Clark smiled, looking down at Damian, who was now fully engrossed in his drawing again. Clark still had some smudges of black left around his mouth from Damian's beard-drawing from earlier.

"Right. So, uh, when are you going to go down and check up on Bruce?"

"He can handle himself," Clark said, but he glanced towards the same part of the floor where the cave was under, and Kon rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I totally think you believe that, with the way you keep glancing at him, like the way you're doing right now," he said accusingly, and Clark startled a little, eyes snapping back to him guiltily.

"I am- I can't believe you- I would never!" Clark said incredulously, but

his stuttering gave him away, and Kon shrugged.

"I can tell you're x-raying. Can you even see anything?" He turned his head toward where Clark was looking, and focused until he could get some X-ray vision to come through for him. The cave was leadlined, back from the days where Superman and Batman weren't on good terms. He couldn't even see the bats in the ceiling. "You can't!"

"I'm just... Worried, okay?" Clark said a little nervously as Kon looked back at him, blinking a couple of times to see Clark's actual face and not his skeleton.

"Yeah, so go check on him! Bats don't listen to reason unless you bug them with it," Kon said reasonably.

"You know that from experience, huh?" Clark asked, trying for a teasing tone. Kon shrugged, seeing the tenative joke for what it was.

"Tim's not great at the whole... Knowing when to eat and when to sleep thing. So sometimes he just doesn't do it! So yeah, I know from experience. Sometimes you have to hit them with a pillow or trap them in a bed to even get them to consider not being idiots about it."

"Are you suggesting I hit Bruce with a metaphorical pillow?"

"Don't let Batman know I said that, or you're going to lose a relative, because he's going to kill me," Kon said very seriously, and Clark scoffed.

"He won't kill you."

"No, seriously, I'm dating one of his kids, and I'm telling you to hit him with a pillow. It's a miracle he hasn't already drop-kicked me in the face," Kon stated.

"In your face? Do you think he could get that high?" Clark questioned very skeptically and now sort of morbidly curious.

"I don't know! It's Batman! He probably could if he really wanted to."

Clark didn't object to that, and saw out of the corner of his eye Damian's little head suddenly get way too heavy for his body. He caught him before his face hit the crayons, and Damian sat up, blinking heavily.

"**Time for a nap, Damian**," Clark smiled, and Damian frowned.

"**Where's baba, Cla**'?" he asked sleepily as Clark picked him up. Hm. Bruce had said he was going to nap with Damian. That was a good enough excuse.

"**Let's go find him**," Clark suggested, and got a sleepy nod from the toddler. Titus sensed the standing up, and fluidly shifted up onto all legs, ready to go wherever his little master went. "That's my cue."

"Yeah," Kon agreed, standing up along with Clark.

"Kon?" came Tim's call. "It's you against Dick next!"

"You got it, Tim," Conner called back, flying over to his tiny boyfriend with a grin.

Bruce wasn't entirely sure how long he'd been sitting there, watching Cassandra's chest fall and rise, when Clark appeared in the opening out to the larger part of the batcave, carrying a snoozing Damian cradled to his chest. Titus immediately walked into the room and sniffed at Cassandra, before making a sad little whining noise.

"Hey," he said, his voice silent. Bruce barely looked up from Cassandra until Clark pushed him back in his chair. Bruce was just about to protest when Damian was draped over his torso, by then entirely knocked out. Titus made a lap of the room before coming to rest on Bruce's right side, on the cave floor.

"What are you doing?" Bruce questioned, and his voice came out lower and more gravelly than he'd intended.

"You promised Alfred you'd nap with him, and Damian found out. So he didn't want to nap until he was with you," Clark explained, staring down at Bruce. Bruce frowned and pulled his glasses off his face, shoving them into his pocket. Clark let him, before looking over at the sleeping Cassandra.

"Hmmm," Bruce said, questioning the credibility of that statement, but Cassandra was probably going to be knocked out a little bit past Damian's nap-time anyway, and he didn't really mind. He wasn't going to nap, of course, but Damian was warm and a bit of a comfort for him.

"How's she doing?" Clark asked, sitting down on Cassandra's bed very lightly. He listened to the low lub-dub of her heartbeat, not fast like

she was scared, but faster than her usual slow, and silent heart. While he was at it, he tuned over to Damian, resting in his father's lap. His heartbeat was fast, like little childrens' heartbeats were, and in great contrast to Bruce's calm crawl.

"Sedated. Her vitals are getting better. We think she got away without sustaining any major permanent damage," Bruce replied, tearing his eyes away from Cassandra's gently expanding and contracting ribcage to adjust Damian to sleeping in the crook of his elbow. Damian was clutching his plush bat tight, his little doll-looking mouth slightly open and hair a little messy.

"That's a relief," Clark exhaled. "So, has she said anything about who did this to her?"

"No. She's been asleep since she got the antidotes," he stated, placing a hand on Damian's butt to keep him from rolling out of his lap. "I'm now more confident she'll pull through, but she'll need to be on the bench for a while. It takes time to reset after poisonings."

"It's called poison for a reason," Clark agreed. "Kryptonite poisoning sure leaves me feeling weak. Can only imagine three poisons and being alive after that."

"It's like being run over by a train a few times," Bruce said, now unable to look away from the little creature that was Damian. He was wearing a striped onesie, green and white, that ended just before his ankles, where Winnie the Pooh socks were sticking out. They were pink with Piglet on them, smiling up at him. Damian's feet were so small. Bruce internally scoffed at his little boy, who felt as relaxed as a ragdoll in his arms.

"Did that happen during training or afterwards?" Clark questioned lowly, and Bruce considered that. Considered Damian, who had gone through the same thing he had, but with higher expectations. After all, he was an al Ghul, with good genes such as those, he was expected to never fail, never lose. Bruce took a deep breath.

"When I was training for the League, they fed us small portions of poison in our food for us to build up a tolerance. Damian was raised by the League, and Jason lived with them for a few years, which is why they're immune to doses of most common poisons," he said very slowly, reluctantly, and never looking away from Damian. He hated sharing information like this. But this was Clark. And he hadn't specified which poisons he was talking about.

"And you, then."

"Yes. Cassandra was put through a similar treatment by her father and her trainers," he stated. "Just a little different than to the League's standards."

"You never considered having the rest of them do it?" Clark asked carefully.

"I considered it. When Tim came to me, wanting to be my Robin, because after Jason... I wanted to offer him, all of them really, every sort of safety and protection I could, but when I talked about it, Alfred was..."

"Appalled?" Clark suggested, and Bruce looked up at him, finally, and his blue eyes were shockingly looking a new sort of sad blue. Not the ususal 'I've lost a lot of people and I can't stand losing another' sort of sad that was common with superheroes. No, a 'I'm a terrible person and should never be allowed around people' sort of sad, which shook Clark to his very core.

"Essentially," Bruce laughed, but it was a horrible-sounding laugh. Nothing joyous about it at all. "Actually, and I quote, 'shocked that I would even consider something so inhumane'. And I realized that gently poisoning your children isn't good. Or helpful. Or a good way to keep them safe. In the least. I put my children through many things so that they don't have to go through what I have, and giving them immunity in exchange for a false safety wasn't worth it. Obviously, Talia disagreed with me, which is both reassuring and bad."

"How so?" Clark asked softly, treasuring this gentle, heartfelt moment between them, even if it wasn't very happy. Clark doubted Bruce had a lot of happy gentle, heartfelt moments.

"Because her disagreeing with me meant that I did the right thing, but also that Damian had to go through it too," Bruce stated, visibly caging that sadness and shoving it into a box far away in his mind. Clark could see it in his steel-blue eyes before they returned to the sleeping Damian.

They sat in silence for a moment, not really tense, but not entirely comfortable either, but Clark didn't really mind all that much. Finally, he gently squeezed Cassandra's cold hand, and stood up again.

"I should go check on the other boys. Want me to ask Alfred to bring you some lunch?"

"No thank you," Bruce said, but the look on Clark's face stated that he wasn't actually asking Bruce anything at all. Bruce would've argued, but it would be childish of him, and he didn't have to actually eat whatever was set before him anyways.

Clark nodded, and turned to leave. Bruce was hit by a sudden wave of bad conscience for some reason.

"Hey," he said silently, catching Clark's fingers in his hand when he reached out. Only because he couldn't stand up quick enough to catch his shoulder without waking Damian. Clark grasped his fingers with a soft, confused look on his face. Bruce stared at their clasped hands for a moment, trying to sort out why he was feeling bad all of a sudden, before swallowing. "I...Thank you."

"For what?" Clark asked, moving closer but not letting go of Bruce's hand. If his friend wanted comfort, Clark would give it to him.

"For taking care of the boys. I know they're a handful." Bruce recognized that without Clark here, he could never get away with sitting by Cassandra's bedside all morning. His boys were children, needed near constant attention, and without Clark, he would be chasing Jason and Tim through the hallways right now, probably, not be able to comfort Cassandra when she inevitably woke up confused and in pain again. He was... thankful, and he hadn't told Clark that.

"Good thing I've got two hands, then," Clark smiled, squeezing Bruce's hand before letting go and making to leave again. "Oh, by the way. Remember dinner."

"When are you leaving for Metropolis?" Bruce asked.

"Around five. Need to get home and change and shower and also pick up Lois," he rattled off, like it was a practiced speech. When Bruce cocked an eyebrow at him, Clark smiled sheepishly, Kansas-innocence like a shining beacon. "It's a routine by now. Will probably have to rescue someone before I get home, anyway, so let's say ten to. It's almost two-thirty p.m. now."

Bruce nodded.

"Hope you have fun."

"Hope I don't miss any fun here," Clark smirked.

"Oh, believe me, if the rest of them suddenly start thinking this is a

good time for mutiny, I am armed with sweets. Their favorites," Bruce stated dramatically, and Clark chuckled, recieving a small, small smile in response. "Go. Enjoy the Metropolis cream."

"Scientists and stuff tonight, not the Metropolis cream. Also, how old are you actually?" Clark accused, and Bruce chuckled lowly, patting Damian's little bum absently as Clark exited the room, opting for floating rather than taking the stairs up.

Bruce's butler knew him too well, so by the time Damian had woken up and he had entertained the toddler for almost twenty whole minutes just through talking to him, Alfred appeared with a protein-shake and took Damian back up to his brothers and Clark. Titus followed dutifully, which left him alone with his unconscious daughter.

But by the time Clark was off for his symposium, Bruce had come upstairs again, however reluctantly, for dinner. When he faced a barrage of questions from the children about Cassandra, he patiently explained what he knew and that he had faith she would recover, otherwise he wouldn't be up here, now would he?

Despite that, Bruce pretty quickly excused himself to go downstairs again. After dinner, all the excitement of the day caught up to Tim, who demanded they watch Cinderella, before promptly passing out with his head in Kon's lap.

"This is so weird," Kon whispered to Roy, who was sitting in the loveseat. They were in one of the upper sitting rooms, one with a pretty big TV. "It's Tim, but it's *baby* Tim."

"Hey, join to the club," Roy said, giving Jason a look over the back of the loveseat. Dick was running around the room, playing tug of war with Titus and fetch. Damian was safely put in a nest of blankets, where he was playing with a kiddie puzzle that Dick kept "helping" him start over with whenever he was nearly finished. Damian yelled at him but put it back together anyways. "Jaybird, don't fall. What do you want from the shelf? I'll get it."

Jason was currently trying to climb one of the three bookshelves in the room, and when Roy had spoken, he'd turned his head, but not dropped.

"I'm not some baby," Jason said angrily, and Roy sighed.

"Of course you're not, Jaybird, but you're also sort of short now. Here," Roy said, getting up and crouching, before turning his back to Jason. "If you're gonna be like that, at least get on my shoulders." When Jason gave him a suspicious look, Roy sighed. "Look asshole, I'm honestly just trying to give you a hand. It's 'Little women', you want, right?" Jason's eyes widened, and then narrowed. "Yeah, I know that's one of your favorite books, Jay, because I know you, remember? Please just- let me give you a hand."

When Jason dropped down from the bookshelf, Roy gave him a smile, and took the right book off the shelf, thumbed through and with a worn and cracked spine.

"I get tall?" Jason asked suspiciously after a minute of staring at Roy.

"Buddy, puberty hits you like a ton of bricks, and you come out on the other side with a jawline to die for and thighs thick as tree trunks," Roy sighed happily, and Jason's eyes lit up, clutching his book.

"Really?"

"Oh, believe me. I'll try to find some pictures for you," Roy smirked, sitting down again in a loveseat, Jason now perched on an armrest. Roy pulled his phone out, hid it from Jason when he scrolled through what were probably explicit pictures, if Kon had to guess. Roy felt like that sort of person to him. When the archer found one he liked, he showed it to Jason, who gaped.

"That's *me*?"

"Hell yeah, sweetheart. You grow up pretty," Roy grinned. Jason started blushing. Honest to god blushing.

"Why's my hair white?" he asked. Roy's grin faded.

"Nah," he said half to himself, shaking his head and taking his phone away. "You dyed it that way."

"What? No I didn't. You're lying," Jason said, grappling for the phone.

"You don't think punk ass older you has dyed his hair? You dyed your pubes green once on a dare," Roy declared, and Jason's face was one of disgusted bewilderedment.

"*Dude*, what the fuck? That's just weird!"

"Not kidding," Roy chuckled, obviously thinking back. "That was a good Saint Patrick's Day."

"Ugh, older me sounds crazy."

"Oh, Jaybird, you've got no clue how right you are," Roy sighed, pulling Jason into his side on a reflex. Jason tensed, but was apparently okay enough with Roy that he just about relaxed into it.

Tim nuzzled further into Kon's thigh, holding onto the red S-shield on his chest like it was his personal property, and Kon smiled down at him, feeling sort of enamored by him. He slept in Kon's S-shield shirts when he was older. This just sort of reaffirmed that Tim really liked his shirts, no matter if he said he didn't.

"So, you guys know us when we're older. Does that mean you know who Dick's boyfriend is?" Jason asked Roy innocently, and Dick peeked out from behind another couch.

"Yeah, do you?" he asked happily.

"Sorry, nope. I thought you and Batgirl got back together a while ago, but I don't know why she'd take back your sorry ass," Roy shrugged.

"Babs dates me?" Dick exclaimed incredulously, hopping over the back of the couch with wide eyes. His lips spread into a huge grin. "Wow. Really?"

"Yeah," Roy smirked at how giddy he looked. "Damn, you've really always been into her, huh? Well, I think if you guys were actually dating right now, she'd be here hanging out with you."

"Well I don't know about that. Babs is really...." Dick sighed dreamily, looking up at the ceiling, still with that goofy grin on his face. "She's really strong-willed, so if she had better stuff to do, she'd be doing that."

"Aaaand, we lost him," Jason announced dramatically, standing up in the loveseat. "Damn, Dickie, you really dig Barbie that much? Dickie and Barbie, sitting in a tree, K-I-S ouf!"

Dick had hit him hard in the face with a pillow, and Jason lost his balance and dropped over the back of the loveseat. Thankfully, due to his reflexes, Jason's hands shot out, and he managed a roll back onto his feet, turning around to charge against Dick.

Minor chaos broke out.

Meanwhile in the cave, Cassandra's breathing suggested she was about to wake up, and Bruce had changed the sweat-soaked sheets for her, and gotten her into a tanktop and shorts. She'd thrown up once, not even conscious, and twitched like she'd been having nightmares, but her vitals remained good enough that he wasn't worried. It was just her body trying to get rid of the last of the poison.

Finally, she sighed, and shifted in the bed, blinking heavy eyes open.

"Hey there," he said. "Water?" Cassandra nodded slowly, and he grabbed the water bottle off the ground next to him he'd grabbed for his purpose, and held it up to her lips. When she'd managed a few sips, she nudged it away.

"Bruce," Cassandra got out, and Bruce stroked her sweaty, short hair back.

"I'm here," he promised, and she blinked like her eyelids were too heavy, but she had something to do.

"Bruce. Ghoul," she croaked. Bruce frowned. Ghoul? When he remained clueless, he grabbed her hand, and she grunted, turning his hand over. She tapped out D-A-M-I in Morse code on the back of his hand, and realization struck.

"Al Ghul. Talia did this to you?" he asked, and Cassandra visibly relaxed. She signed 'yes' in ASL, and Bruce felt white-hot rage flood his body. "Of course she knows which poisons you aren't as good as immune to." Cassandra nodded, her eyes slipping shut again now that she'd managed to relay what she wanted to. "Don't worry. You're safe here with me."

Drowsily, Cassandra flipped his hand over again, drawing a heart in his palm. Bruce allowed himself a grim little smile as he watched her slip back into sleep. It was a little astonishing, seeing Cassandra use all the methods of communication she'd been taught since she came into the family that weren't verbal.

Alfred had insisted she needed to be able to express herself without words if she should ever feel safe in this household, and Bruce had agreed. Cassandra had been raised without words, and forcing her to use them wouldn't push her in the right direction. So, Babs taught her sign language, and Jason morse code, and Stephanie had shown her what symbol she herself thought represented what. Of course, since

Cassandra kept drawing little smiley-faces on people's hands and random lines without any further communication, Steph had to teach everyone else too.

Heart meant safe, home, love.

Bruce was going to rip Talia to shreds the next time he saw her.

He brushed her hair back again, and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. It was almost night-time. Clark could get back late, so there was little chance he could go out and hunt Talia down on his own. He'd have to talk to Babs and Steph about it.

There was the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs, and chattering, and Bruce got up, looking out into the cave to see the group of kids he'd left upstairs just an hour ago making their way over to him.

Roy was holding Damian, or actually the blanket nest he was wrapped up in, and had Jason's shoulder in a firm grip. Jason had a cut on his face and blood coming out of his nose, and in front of him, Kon was walking, helping a limping Dick stay on his feet. What was most surprising was that Tim was at the front of the caravan. The moment he laid eyes on Bruce he froze, and so did the rest of them, staring at him like deer caught in headlights.

"How did you get in here?" Bruce asked incredulously. Kon and Roy had no access, and neither did any of the kids right now.

"Well, what did you want me to do, leave them to bleed on the carpet in your study?" came Steph's shout from the top of the stairs.

Of course.

"What happened?" he asked instead, motioning for them to come forward, and Tim, convinced he wasn't in trouble anymore, immediately began blabbering on about Jason and Dick having a physical fist-fight, and Bruce could barely believe his ears. Well, Jason had anger issues, sure, but Dick was normally not that impulsive. Hadn't really been at the age of thirteen either. However, Bruce knew nobody in the world as good at driving someone as happy as Dick mad as Jason Peter Todd.

"Fucking snitch!" Jason called over his shoulder as Kon herded them into the med-ward.

"Language!" Bruce said sharply, and he could practically see Jason's

lips turn into a thin, thin line. He turned back to Tim, who was looking up at him with big eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Ya. Kon wouldn't let me help," Tim stated, and Bruce scoffed, ruffling Tim's hair when he crossed his arms over his chest. "I could've beat them both up!"

"I don't doubt it. Stay out here while I deal with those two," Bruce agreed. He glanced over at Roy, gently rocking Damian, who wasn't angry about being carried by anyone other than Alfred, Dick, Bruce, or Clark. Sort of surprising, but currently very good.

Bruce sat the two fighters down on the hospital bed across from Cass, and the two of them barely took their eyes off of her until he tilted Jason's head up to look at the gash on his cheek. Probably Dick's fingernail.

"What is the matter with you two?" Bruce asked lowly, and immediately, both Dick and Jason's eyes fell to the floor. "No, look at me. Look at me."

He met eyes with both of them, and sighed quietly to himself. He was actually sort of glad that they hadn't grown up together like this, now that Bruce thought about it. They would've driven him to an early grave.

"Are you mad?" Dick asked very very quietly, whilst Jason just pressed his lips together enough that Bruce could still see them trembling.

Bruce sighed deeply, and picked up antiseptic and a bit of cotton from the trolley next to Cassandra's bed. He dabbed at the cut on Jason's face and felt Jason's nose. It didn't feel broken. Luckily, whatever hit Dick had gotten in wasn't hard enough to hurt him. Bruce was actually unsure what that would do to their future selves, if, when Zatanna finally turned them back, Jason would come out with a new scar on his cheekbone, or Dick with a new injury to his foot.

"I'm disappointed," Bruce stated, and saw both boys' shoulders drop. "You know better than to fight each other. You're too old for that."

"Well, I figured since we fight when we're older, we're never to old for it," Dick reasoned. Bruce grabbed the chair he'd been sitting in and grabbed Dick's foot. The boy yelped, so he held it gently before wrapping it up for support. Just sprained, and not very badly, it seemed.

"That's incorrect," Bruce said. "What were you thinking anyways? That it would be *fun* to pummel each other?" That came out a little sharper than he'd intended, but Bruce now had three injured children as opposed to what he'd had this morning, which was zero injured children. He wasn't *happy* about it, alright?

"Jason talked shit about Babs!" Dick exclaimed when Bruce gave Jason a tissue to wipe his nose and began cleaning the scratches covering Dick's arms.

"Language," he replied automatically. "Jason, why would you do that?" Jason shrugged noncommittally, and Bruce scowled. "Well, Barbara will be over in an hour or so. How about you repeat what you said to Dick to her? Hm?"

"No!" Jason exclaimed, wide-eyed as his look snapped up at Bruce guiltily.

"Then you know that whatever you said about Babs was wrong to say. And yet you said it. Why?"

"I just wanted to bug Dick about it 'cos his boyfriend didn't show up to hang out with us!" Jason muttered angrily, crossing his arms over his chest again. Bruce sighed again.

"The reason Dick's significant other didn't show up is because I don't know who it is, and I only asked Conner and Roy out there to show up. Not a lot of people know that all four of you are this small, and I want to keep it that way," Bruce told Jason. "I knew that Conner would show up eventually because of his superhearing, and I also know Roy is currently staying in your apartment in Gotham. That's why I called the two of them, and not anybody else."

"Oh," Dick and Jason said in unison.

"Shouldn't my... Significant other be worried about me?" Dick asked worriedly as Bruce put a plaster on Dick's arm.

"We're all pretty much constantly very busy," Bruce disagreed. "I think your significant other knows you're just busy."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense, I guess," Dick agreed. He peeked over Bruce's head at Cassandra. "Is she awake?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Can we say hi?" Jason asked.

"I don't know if-" There was the rustle of blankets, and Bruce looked over his shoulder at Cassandra, who was looking at them and smiling slightly.

"Hello," she murmured, and Bruce didn't manage to hold them back before they'd bounced over to Cassandra's bed.

"Alright, alright, calm down," Bruce said, lifting Jason off the bed so that he wasn't sitting on Cassandra's legs and pulling Dick away from her, but Cassandra made the sign for "**fine**" and grabbed Dick's arm to pull him down next to her on the bed. "Be careful with your sister," he urged instead, and Jason wiggled out of his grip to sit between Dick and Cassandra's legs.

"Broose?" came Tim's little whisper from the doorway, and Bruce sighed.

"C'mon in Tim," he stated, and immediately Tim zoomed in like a little cat, hopping up on the bed and crawling over to get his siblings.

Steph, who Bruce obviously had forgotten to tell about Cassandra being poisoned, whipped into the medical ward looking shocked and angry. After punching Bruce in the arm rather angrily, she took his chair and nearly choked Cassandra in a hug.

Bruce would protest more, but Cassandra kissed Dick's cheek, brushed a hand through Jason's hair, twirled a lock of Steph's hair, and squeezed Tim's hand. Reconnecting, and smiling at them sweetly. He knew the comfort they managed to bring him whenever he was... Having a hard time with an injury. Stephanie stroked her hair and Dick told her all about what had happened today, that he'd beat Superboy in a race, and Bruce took that moment of calm to walk outside the ward to glare at Roy and Kon.

"**Baba**," Damian said happily, reaching out for him from his blanket nest, and Bruce took him from Roy's arms, trapping his little arms in the blanket and putting his head against Bruce's shoulder.

"**I'm here, little prince. Go to sleep**," he shushed, and Damian shifted a little until he was comfortable, and tried to do just that.

Now Bruce's glare was back on Kon and Roy, who looked uncomfortable.

"Um," Kon began, but was cut off by Bruce's eyes narrowing.

"Are you kidding me?" he hissed at the teenagers, who recoiled. At least Kon did. Roy shrugged a little, but his shoulders stayed almost all the way up when he supposedly relaxed. "I leave them alone with you for less than an hour and they beat each other up?"

"In our defense, I had no clue they knew how to actually beat each other up. They're, like, ten," Kon pointed out.

"Well, Jase did make a spectacular backflip earlier today," Roy admitted. "That might've been a heads-up. Did not know he was a biter though. That one's new for even me."

"I had more faith in you than was deserved, obviously," Bruce growled, and Roy backed up along with Kon as Bruce turned around to look into the medical ward.

"Alright boys, come on, let Cassandra rest," he said, his voice holding no room for argument, and the boys sighed but trudged off the bed. "Can you stand without it hurting?" he asked Dick, who nodded, and Bruce nudged Tim out of the room under silent choruses of 'bye Cass'. "Stephanie, I left something I'd like you to check out on the computer. Loop Babs in."

"Why can't I-" she began to protest, and then met Bruce's eyes. "Oh. Uh, I'll check it out."

"Good. I'll be back," he promised Cassandra, who nodded weakly, before he disappeared back out into the cave to herd his children up to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I have feelings about Damian as a baby and I'm being obvious about this in this chapter.
About Cassandra's non-verbal speaking... I know in the comics she wasn't very interested in ASL, but I'm personally a fan, so I presented some options. You're not just raised not talking and then magically start using words. People who have been deaf from birth don't think in words so much as pictures, and I feel like it'd be a little like that with her too
As for the lil poll I did last chapter, it seems we'll be going mature at some point! Cool beans.

Also thanks for 1000 kudos!!! I am blown away by your support and appreciation, and I love you all!!!!!!!!!! In celebration (and also because I can't stop myself), have a long ass chapter!
<3<3<3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clark was pretty good at his job, even when distracted, so he listened during the speeches, asked questions afterwards, and managed to jot down enough that he'd be able to get some work done tomorrow on his article. Lois snooped around too, compiling extra data and covering for him when he had to dash off to rescue people from a burning building, and then help some kids who had been stranded with popped tires on their bikes.

The kids were pretty scared, out in the relative darkness and at most Damian's usual age, and Superman set them down in their suburbian neighborhood and told them to stay safe. When they ran into their houses to tell their parents about Superman, he stood there, contemplating.

If he did end up, however magically impossible that sounded, with Bruce, he'd never get the white picket-fence life. He and Bruce would grow old in that huge mansion, because Batman did not work without Gotham, but Superman was for the world. Their lives would consist of nearly not making it out alive of dangerous situations, blood on carpet, scars all over the place, lovebites that people thought were just regular bruises.

Clark ached with want just thinking about it.

When he saw the rustle of curtains of the parents looking out through their windows to catch a glimpse of him, he threw a blinding grin at them before disappearing up into the dark night sky, and making his way back to the symposium with a heavy heart.

Roy and Kon were sent home, and Bruce tucked everyone into their beds. Damian was particularly restless for no understandable reason, which meant Bruce stayed with him for a bit longer than he'd intended to, and he only got back down at around midnight. Clark had texted, saying he was coming in about forty minutes, and Bruce replied to that before sitting down at the screen.

He turned the screens on, and saw that Batgirl and Spoiler were pinging him from some rooftop over in Old Gotham.

"Batgirl, Spoiler, how did it go?" he asked.

"That depends on what you mean," came Stephanie's voice, but she sounded a little bit like her airflow was being restricted somehow. Then there was the scratching of her comm being removed from her ear, and Bruce was about to switch to visual when he realized Stephanie didn't have a domino or a cowl.

"We did what you wanted. She just found us out," Barbara said grimly, just as he switched visuals and audio to Batgirl's cowl, and was met with Talia standing with Spoiler on her knees in front of her, hands around Stephanie's neck like she was going to snap it any second. She was staring into Babs' eyes intently. Bruce cursed.

"Hello, beloved. We need to talk," Talia said into Stephanie's comm, her smooth, sinuous voice echoing in the cave. Bruce cranked the volume down and growled.

"About what? Haven't you done enough?" he asked her, and saw Talia roll her eyes.

"I have no interest in the girls, beloved," she said into Stephanie's comm.

"What *do* you want, then?" Bruce asked, his blood simmering with anger. Oh, Talia was always so good at getting on every nerve he had.

"Like I said, I want to talk. Black Bat got in our way. Her injury was coincidental and not my intent. The man at fault has been dealt with. I fully intend to honor our deal," she stated in a business-like tone. 'Dealt with' was League-language for tortured, but Bruce wanted justice, not blind punishment. There was a difference there that Talia had never been able to see.

Hmmm. Bruce had sort of assumed when Cassandra had stated al Ghul, she meant Talia, and not what she stood for. Spelling out League of Assassins was a bit harder than that Dami, of course, as well as croaking 'ghoul'. Talia rarely lied about her intentions to hurt someone, either. She was very fond of telling him exactly why she hurt who she hurt. She wouldn't lie about this.

"Wait, you have a deal with this psycho?" Steph exclaimed, loud

enough for her comm in Talia's ear to pick up, and Talia twisted her neck testingly, a look on her face like a particularly large lion looked at a cub that wasn't theirs. Uninterested, but ready to kill to ensure their own future. Stephanie twisted with her, gasping and trying not to get her neck wrung.

"Hurting Spoiler isn't doing you any favors," Bruce stated, and Talia's usually smooth line of lips pursed.

"The child should know when to keep her tongue in check. To respect her superiors."

"She's always been spectacularly bad at that," Babs stated, and Bruce saw the screen in front of him crackle when the captors hit Batgirl over the head very viciously.

"What are you doing in Gotham, Talia?" Bruce asked her.

"Taking care of things," she stated vaguely. Very unlike Talia, who liked to taunt him with her plans. "Setting up our dinner date."

"No. Take your people and get. Out. Of. Gotham," Bruce growled, and he saw Talia's eyes narrow dangerously, her hold on Stephanie's neck still quite hard. Then her plum-colored lips slid into a smile.

"You're so testy, beloved," she chided. "There's the temperament I was talking about."

"Now," Batgirl said to Spoiler, and tossed a tazer-disk with a sure flick of a wrist. The disc attatched to Talia's arm, and she went down in a crackle of electricity as Stephanie shoved away from her, diving into the fray as immediately the assassins holding onto Babs sprang into action.

The fight was short and brutal, and Barbara was hit so hard around the head her comm. unit in the cowl fritzed, which made Bruce's connection go dark.

When he managed to get visual back online, Barbara was looking at the spot where Talia had been just a moment ago, Stephanie's comm lying in the roof-top dust. Bruce cursed.

"What sort of shit are you knee-deep in now, B?" Barbara asked with the tone of someone who was very used to getting in the middle of Bruce and Talia's messy relationship.

"Ping the location, I'm going out," he stated, and signed off, sprinting over to the cases with suits. When he couldn't find his own, he took the stairs down three at a time to get within shouting range of Alfred.

"Alfred, where's my suit?" Bruce growled, and the butler appeared from the medical ward with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Oh dear. Going out to take revenge again, are we, Sir?" Alfred asked lightly.

"*Suit*," Bruce said, sharper.

"How capable are you of moving your torso without causing further damage to it, Master Bruce?" Alfred asked, entirely unruffled.

"Capable enough."

"Not in the least. You're very welcome to take a seat by the batcomputer and listen, Sir."

"You heard what Talia said. I know she's still in Gotham. Give. Me. My. Suit," Bruce said, his voice deathly low, and Alfred pursed his lips slightly, like he'd smelled something foul.

"I would like to make it clear I advise against this," Alfred stated and walked over to one of the warderobes for post-patrol wear. It was mostly stuffed with his kids clothes, and occasional sweats of his, but those always got stolen or disappeared when Dick forgot to bring his own. Now, in his box, lay his folded armor, and Bruce pulled the box out and immediately began picking through the pieces as a disgruntled Alfred went upstairs for the night.

Bruce's record for getting into his suit without help was maybe four minutes, and that was excluding checking the belt and the grapple hook, which he could do in the car if he put it on auto. He got Alfred to tell Clark, whenever he showed up, to meet him in Gotham, and took off into the night.

Finally, maybe half an hour later, Superman floated into view above him, looking skeptical and worried.

"Hey, are the girls okay? I mean, it's not that I doubt them-" he began, and was interrupted by a voice somewhere behind him.

"That's nice to hear, but, y'know, would you have asked if it was the Robins?" Barbara asked, arms crossed over the batsymbol on her chest. Clark whipped around in the air, looking gobsmacked.

"I was Robin!" Spoiler pointed out.

"You know what I mean," Batgirl said challengingly, looking up at Superman. "Do you think we need to prove ourselves to you?"

"That's not- I didn't- You met Talia! She's- She's very dangerous!" Superman, or probably more Clark, sputtered, looking entirely gobsmacked.

"Just a different flavor of assassins. We've fought worse. We've literally fought worse in front of your face," Stephanie pointed out.

"I-" Clark hurried to defend himself, when he was interrupted by Barbara.

"You're lucky Supergirl isn't an idiot, or we'd be without any bright Kryptonians around here," Batgirl tsked.

"You've embarrased Superman enough for the night, Batgirl. Go back to patrol," Bruce said dismissively, and Batgirl rolled her eyes very clearly.

"Don't be an obsessive asshole about this. Nice to see ya Supes," she tossed off before getting her grapple out and disappearing.

Spoiler waved at him before taking off too, and Clark shook his head, as if to clear his brain of that encounter. He was really just wanting to make sure they were alright because he worried in general. He would ask Bruce that too if he didn't know Bruce had come directly here from the cave.

"You track heartbeats," Bruce stated the moment they were alone, and Clark blinked, not dropping down on the rooftop next to him, but lowering himself a little.

"Well, yes, I do. Of people I know. Sometimes."

"You've met Talia," Bruce stated again, and Clark wrinkled his nose in a not-very-Superman-like way.

"You want me to track her heartbeat?"

"She knows where my cameras are and what to do to avoid them. I

need you to listen for her."

"B..." Clark sighed, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

"You've heard it once, and you remember. You have an eidetic memory, Superman," Bruce reminded him, making Clark wince mid-air.

"Well, yes, and I'd love to help you-"

"Then shut up and start listening," Bruce snapped. Clark sighed again, but concentrated, trying to recall the sound of her heartbeat. Once he was pretty sure it was the right one, he listened around.

"I can't find her anywhere in Gotham, at least," he stated after a minute or two, frowning when he noticed Bruce's clenched jaw. "Look, she's gone, alright. You want her out of Gotham anyways, right?"

Batman's cape swished around him as he turned briskly, cursing under his breath.

"She hurt Black Bat. Nearly wrung Spoiler's neck tonight," Bruce stated after a moment, pacing the rooftop.

"I honestly have so many issues with your ex," Clark said before he could stop himself, and Bruce stopped pacing for a moment.

"I was young, and stupid, and in love. I don't make the same mistake twice," he growled in the Batman voice. Clark felt that specific sentiment hit him pretty hard, and he dropped down on the rooftop a little dejectedly as Bruce got back to pacing.

"Of course. Look, it's late, I'll go back to manor and check on the kids if you want to stay out for the night," he said. Bruce nodded, and then Clark blinked. "Wait a minute. You were out *last* night, and then Cassandra was out late and you didn't sleep. You need to go to sleep!"

"I know my own limits," Bruce scoffed.

"It's Monday tomorrow. Kon has school that he's not skipping, I have work. That leaves you and Roy with the kids. You can't go running around after your kids when you're exhausted,"

"You think not sleeping for two nights in a row is what would make me exhausted?" Bruce said incredulously.

"You're getting more sleep now than usual," he pointed out, before

turning his head as he heard something.

"Dick?" he heard Jason whisper as his hearing hyper-focused on the manor. Dick groaned in reply. "Bruce isn't here." There was the rustle of bedsheets moving.

"Yeah, c'mon in under the covers, Jaybird," Dick mumbled, and there was the thump of Jason hopping onto the bed. Clark forced his hearing back to the rooftop and Bruce, and held a finger up.

"Jason just got into Dick's bed because you weren't in yours," he declared as Bruce opened his mouth. The Batman pursed his lips, and seemed to think about it.

"Hmmm," he muttered as he poked Clark in the chest in annoyance as he walked past him on his way to the batmobile standing below in the alley. He knew Talia was gone the moment he got to the rooftop, but that didn't mean it hurt to try. He *had* promised to check up on Cassandra before going out here in a hurry, and Jason kicked in his sleep. Bruce didn't need to expose Dick to that. "Go through the cave."

"You got it," Clark beamed, to which Bruce rolled his eyes, before swinging down to the ground and getting in the car.

Once he got home, Bruce transferred Jason to his bed instead, getting in bed with him and promptly getting kicked in the thigh by Damian, who was still fast asleep but very much disliked being moved around. Bruce chuckled to himself, but he could tell that he wasn't going to get a lot of sleep anyway, so he propped himself up and grabbed his tablet.

"Found this in the hallway," came Clark's low, dark voice from the doorway, and Bruce looked up at the reporter, fiddling with Damian's toy bat. The soft light from the hallway outside hit his hair from the back, making it look suspiciously soft.

"He must've dropped it earlier. Explains why he had such trouble settling down," Bruce frowned. "Can't imagine why he wouldn't ask for it, though."

"He's a little oddball like that," Clark agreed, walking around Bruce's bed to get to Damian's little attatchable bed that he'd half-vacated. The toddler's legs were nearly pressed against his father's thighs, his arms stretched out over his head. Clark scoffed softly, and Bruce

smiled as he placed the plush-bat next to Damian, who immediately grabbed it and wrapped his arms around it.

Leaning down, Clark brushed a kiss against Damian's forehead with a little smile, and Bruce hummed.

"Maybe I need to reassess," he stated, and Clark raised an eyebrow in question. "Your parenting. It seems it's teenagers that scare you, not children."

"Children are... Easier," Clark nodded, before shaking his head again. "I think I was just... Mad. At Lex for making another responsibility, at Kon for being... Too much like me and too much like Lex at the same time. You know?"

"Surprisingly, yes. You're a journalist, aren't you supposed to be better with words?" Bruce teased, to which Clark smiled softly.

"Hey, you got what I meant. That's what matters," Clark said, bracing his hands against the little crib-thing Damian was in. From Bruce's pensive look, there was something on his mind. Clark was ready to wait him out.

They sat in silence for almost two whole minutes before Bruce cleared his throat lowly.

"Talia keeps saying Damian has my temperament," he finally said, looking up at Clark and looking strangely uncomfortable.

"Oh, yeah. One thing we agree on," Clark chuckled. Bruce frowned deeply at that, to which Clark rolled his eyes and sat down on the bed. This was going to be a Conversation, not just a little talk. "It's not necessarily a bad thing. Just, y'know, combined with the rest of Damian's upbringing, it comes out sounding bad. It gives him room to grow, though. He's already grown up so much since you got him."

"Yeah," Bruce agreed, looking over at the snoozing Jason. "This one's a little too far gone to raise him right, though, huh."

"He's here now, isn't he?" he shrugged. "I don't think he's too far gone. Grew up too quick, is all. You just have to find something that makes him shrink again."

"Poetic, Kansas," Bruce said a little sarcastically, and Clark grinned shyly.

"Well, you asked."

"I didn't."

"You implied," Clark corrected himself. Bruce rolled his eyes, but smiled a little to himself.

"Goodnight Clark." The reporter got back on his feet, still smiling.

"G'night Bruce, Jay, Dami," he sing-songed, before pulling the door closed after him.

The room was yet again shrouded in darkness, and Bruce went back to reviewing reports and trying to follow Talia out of Gotham. He knew he lost her when a couple of blocks away from the scene, she smirked at a security camera over her shoulder before disappearing into the shadows. Luckily, Damian hadn't gotten Talia's flare for the dramatic. Maybe his though, which was probably worse.

Bruce was reflecting on that when he felt the little body next to him in the bed shift.

"Bruce?" Jason mumbled distantly. He raised his elbow to look at little Jason, and blinked down at sleepy teal eyes.

"Is the light too bright?" he asked worriedly, considering trying to tune the tablet even darker.

"No," Jason sighed, shutting his eyes again. If the light wasn't too bright, and he hadn't made a move to go pee or get a drink, what was-
"You came back."

Oh.

"Yes. Bats don't like the light," Bruce joked silently, and Jason rubbed his cheek against the pillow underneath his head distantly, shifting underneath the covers again.

"'M sorry older me doesn't like you," Jason mumbled sleepily, and Bruce felt his heart tug. He swallowed.

"You don't have to say that you're sorry. It's mostly my fault," Bruce promised, stroking Jason's hair. Jason nuzzled into his side tiredly, like the actual ten-year-old he was now, not the cocky older boy he tried to act like. "I messed up, and I didn't do enough to fix it, in your eyes. We don't really agree on things anymore."

"'M sure it's just you being an ass," Jason said, patting his stomach a little derisively. Bruce felt a lump in his throat building, which was uncomfortable and weird. It rarely happened anymore. Still, he chuckled, and stroked Jason's warm cheek, relishing in all the freckles under his thumb. Jason rarely took off his helmet around him anymore, much less the domino.

"A little bit, I guess. And you."

"Nuh-uh. I can't be an ass."

"No? I bet your brothers would disagree."

"That's 'cos they're wimps," he mumbled, and Bruce scoffed to himself.

"Sleep, Jason. And don't call your brothers wimps. They're not," he murmured.

"Not Cass, at least. She's not a wimp. But that's 'cos she's my sister," Jason sighed to himself and shifted, burying his face further into Bruce's side before falling back asleep.

After that, Bruce decided it was time to go to sleep, if only to get rid of that awful, clawing feeling in his chest.

That morning, Bruce was handed a very happy Damian as Clark took off for work with a coffee-thermos in hand, as per usual by now. Dick was eating cereal in front of the TV with Jason, and Tim was sleepily leaning on his leg as Clark crouched down for a hug from him.

"Be good today," he warned Tim, who yawned and nodded, before using one hand to brace against Bruce's leg, and the other to rub his one eye.

"Hurry up or you're going to be late," Bruce reminded him patiently.

"Right, sorry, sorry," Clark grinned, taking off through the veranda doors.

"C'mon," Bruce sighed long-sufferingly at Clark's slowness, nudging Tim along into Dick's current tv-room. "I'm sure Dick's watching some good cartoons."

Tim hopped onto the couch next to Dick, and Bruce set Damian down on the floor, where Titus was resting. Immediately, the big black dog

was covered in toddler-kisses.

"Jas- Ti- Dam- Dick!" Bruce said, stumbling over the names. That felt disturbingly normal, honestly.

"Wha'?" Dick asked, mouth full of cereal and not even looking up from the tv.

"Where'd Jason go?"

"Boo' she'," Dick said without even chewing, pointing to the top shelf of one of the few bookshelves to the left in the room. Jason was curled up on the top shelf, back to the room, but when Dick gave his position away, he made an annoyed noise and turned around, one of the smaller Nerf-guns in hand.

"Snitch!" he exclaimed, sticking his tongue out at Dick, and shooting at him with a nerf dart, aiming for his eye and missing only because Nerfs weren't actual guns.

"Come down from the bookshelf, Jason," Bruce said amusedly, and Jason shot at him too, which Bruce batted off.

He set Damian down in the little playpen in front of the coffee table, or baby-prison as Tim and Jason called it, which Bruce had unearthed from underneath the piles in the toy-room and set up for whenever Roy and Kon were around. Superboy didn't like picking the toddler up because older Damian didn't like him, and he thought he'd use his younger form to get revenge or something. Damian was pretty indifferent to Roy, as in he wouldn't cry if he was picked up by him, but he didn't reply to the archer, even when he tried something in Farsi.

As it was, Damian had climbed out of it six times already, because he was bored or he wanted to play with Titus, or there was a marble on the floor Dick had left lying around that was shiny that he wanted to put in his mouth. For now, it was just to slow the toddler down, rather than contain him.

Then Bruce stood at the base of the bookshelf and looked up "C'mon Jason. I'll catch you."

"Your ribs are hurt," Jason pointed out helpfully.

"Doesn't mean I can't catch you." He could practically hear Alfred's displeased tut, but ignored it. He *could*, if he had to.

"'Course it does!" Jason said, looking appalled and sliding off the bookshelf all on his own.

"Right," Bruce smiled silently to himself as he herded him over to the couch. When he had all of them lined up on the couch, except for Damian, who was content in the playpen with a few different-colored balls. Bruce's hands went to his hips as he looked down at his children. "Today it's just the five of us. We can do that, right?" He pinned them with a stern look.

"Depends. Can we go outside?" Jason challenged immediately, sitting up on his knees in the couch, and Bruce sighed.

"On a walk, yes, fine, but then you're all staying within grabbing-range. No running off."

"Can we see Cassandra?" Dick asked politely, now having finished chewing.

"If you're on your best behavior, sure," Bruce agreed.

"Yeah Jason!" Tim said loudly, giving Jason a pointed look. Jason shot at him, and Tim rolled off the couch and in underneath the coffee table. Bruce sighed deeply as Jason hopped over the couch for cover and Tim rolled out from underneath the coffee table with a nerf gun about as large as half of him, and aimed at Jason.

"We're off to a great start, of course," he said, mostly to himself, as Dick was shot in the neck by Jason. Dick yelled something, probably a PG-13 curseword, and hopped over the back of the couch to get him with a noogie, and Damian was just laughing over in his playpen, leaning on the railing with a challenging look in his eyes. "**Are you going to tip the playpen, Damian?**"

"Noooo," Damian said innocently, but he leaned even heavier on the fence decorated with bees and flowers, and tipped his nose up in that very annoying, very sweet way. Dick chased Jason out of the room, and Tim dragged the nerf-gun after himself, picking up Shakira the lion on the way after his brothers.

"**Come here you little-**" Bruce stretched his hands out after him, and Damian screeched with laughter when he stepped into the playpen, toddling in fast circles around him to get away. Bruce allowed himself a smile as he chased after Damian, who threw a ball at him with such accuracy, Bruce could practically see it for the batarang toss it actually was.

Finally, he caught the toddler, who had not yet been dressed, but was still running around in his night-diapers and the t-shirt that declared 'My daddy's a superhero!'. Bruce heard the shutter of a camera just as he lifted him, and looked up to see Alfred standing with a Polaroid camera in hand. There was a whirring as the camera spit the picture out, and Alfred took it and shook it, looking up at him.

"Would Sir like a copy?" Alfred asked pointedly, and Bruce adjusted the giggling Damian onto his hip.

"Baba, ball," he said, pointing insistently at the blue ball on the floor.

"I-" Bruce stared at Alfred's raised eyebrow, until Damian tugged on his ear angrily, and he had to stop to untangle himself. "**Don't pull on people's ears, Damian, it's not nice.**"

"**Cla' would give me ball!**" Damian declared angrily, and alright, Damian's moodswings were pretty extreme, going from screeching with happiness to anger in a moment, but that wasn't on him. That was all on her. Also, children were like that. Spoiled ones especially.

"**Patience, little prince**," Bruce soothed, and crouched down to pick the ball up and give to Damian. The moment he'd gotten it in his hand, Damian threw it across the room, to which Bruce looked around, and noticed that Alfred had taken off. "**I'm not picking that up for you, Damian. You threw it. If you want it, you're going to have to go pick it back up yourself.**"

When Damian reached for the ball again, Bruce set him down outside of the playpen, and let him go in search of the ball, but Damian stayed there, looking up at Bruce. He looked over at the ball, and then Bruce again. He reached his arms up.

"**You can go get the ball, Damian. I'll still be here when you have it**," Bruce promised, but Damian still looked skeptical, so Bruce sat down in the playpen. "**See? Not going anywhere. Go get the ball.**"

Damian whined, but didn't say any real words, just expressing displeasure with him.

"Go, Damian," he said, in English this time, and Damian looked over at the ball and then him again, before running over to the blue ball over by the couch, and then running back to him. "**See? Not so bad! You have the ball.**"

Damian held his hands up again, looking sort of intent, and Bruce

sighed and gave up on trying to understand what his toddler really wanted. Sometimes children had the hugest breakdowns over entirely insignificant things, and you couldn't do anything about it.

So he picked the toddler up again, and stepped out of the playpen, heading towards his room.

"**Let's get into some real clothes, alright?**" he murmured into Damian's hair, and took the steps two at a time up.

Roy came just before lunch was being served, and stole Dick and Jason's attention almost immediately. Damian and Tim were relocated to the kitchen to help Alfred bake some cookies, which gave Bruce the time to catch up on social things.

He checked out what he'd been missing in the corporate world, skimmed his work emails, ordered some flowers for his secretary who had to defend his office in his absence, and realized he hadn't called Ma Kent in over two weeks. He knew she was okay since she'd called Clark earlier last week, but still. He liked talking to Ma Kent.

"Bruce! Hi darlin'. How're you doing?" Ma Kent asked him brightly, picking up on the third ring.

"Oh, I'm good. How's your hip?"

"Doing good. I'm not that old yet, Bruce," she chided, and there was the sound of dishes clinking in the background. "I heard about the boys. Driving you up the wall yet?"

"Close," Bruce sighed, leaning back in his chair. There was a suspicious giggling coming from outside, and he was trying to pay attention to that as well as Martha. "Clark helps though. I don't think Damian's ever been this nice to anyone. It's probably because he's a pushover."

Ma hummed thoughtfully. "I think you think anyone who's nice is a pushover."

"Not entirely inaccurate. Case in point: my toddler barely toddles because he'll reach up for Clark the moment he's on the floor and wants back up." Ma laughed, and Bruce leaned back further in his chair, angling his ear out towards the hallway.

"Clark's always been 'bit weak around little kids. You should bring

them out here. I'm sure they'd love running free. I remember when Clark was that young, whenever he was awake, he was up and runnin'," she mused.

"Dick's always been like that. Jason just likes to hide everywhere. Tim likes to sit down and think sometimes, without really thinking through where he's sitting. Damian is, as previously stated, a spoiled toddler."

"Well, I'd love to have them. Been a while since I heard the little pitter patter of feet on the floorboards," she said warmly.

"Yes, it's... A special sound," Bruce said, squinting when the whispers and giggles from outside quieted. "An even more special sound around here is currently silence. Could you hold on for me, Martha?"

"Sure, sweetheart," she chuckled.

Bruce stood up and heard Tim's electric car start up outside, and peeked out of his study just in time to see the Barbie car go skidding by him. They were headed straight for the stairs.

Cursing to himself, Bruce ran after them, and caught the back of the car as the first two wheels left the safety of upstairs.

"I should've known this was a mistake," Bruce grunted as he hauled the electric car back up onto the carpeted floor. "Tim, Jason, you're *not* allowed to go down the stairs with the car. If you want it to run downstairs, you have to ask an adult or teenager to pick it up and put it down for you. You can't just go driving down the stairs like it's the edge of a cliff."

His little explorers both gave him wide-eyed looks of innocence.

"We were just playing Thelma and Louise," Jason said sweetly, and Bruce let a loud breath out of his nose.

"When did you watch that movie?"

"Roy said I could."

"Of course he did," Bruce sighed. "Where is he now?"

"He fell asleep on the couch after mumblin' about carrying the torch? I dunno, he looked tired though, so we thought we'd let him sleep," Jason declared. Bruce huffed and turned to the other little criminal. Tim shrugged.

"I wanted to see what would happen," he said, as if that explained everything. Bruce could hear himself in that, but Tim and Jason running Tim's electric car down the stairs really didn't fall into the same category as his own experiments.

"The car would most probably break, and you and Jason would get very hurt," Bruce informed them.

"Well I don't think so!" Tim declared haughtily. "I won't believe it until I see it."

"Fine," Bruce said, and pulled his phone out to call Lucius Fox.

Chapter End Notes

I saw a panel from a comic where Bruce's love for his children literally saves the world this week, which is why I'm heaping the domestic fluff on this story with a shovel. I fricking love domestic superbat alright, I do.
Also Bruce has like seven children, he definitely does the parent thing, the "Ja-Ti-Di-you know who I mean, get over here" thing. My parents only have two children and they still can't keep us apart, seven must be more dramatic.
Also, 1100 kudos!!!! Officially fricking crazy!!!! Wow! Thank you so much for all your sweet comments and everything!!! I love all your support!!! Thank you so so so much!!! <3<3<3<3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The article had been simple and quick enough in Clark's opinion, but Lois was brutal with her critique, beating him up with her red pen, and he spent the majority of the morning revising and editing until the article was 'passable' by her standards.

"You're mean," Clark pouted when he finally finished just before lunch.

"I'm exactly what you need, actually, Smallville," Lois stated as she pulled her light summer-jacket on. "C'mon, hurry up, I'm starving."

That statement, however innocent, made thoughts stir up in Clark's mind. He kept hearing Bruce saying that he'd never be with anyone else ever again, and that always made Clark ache. He wanted Bruce to be happy. Preferably, happy with him, but maybe what would make Bruce happiest was to be on his own. Maybe that could make Clark happy too.

They'd gotten their food by the time Clark voiced his thoughts out loud.

"Maybe I should just... Try to find someone else. Get over him. It's never going to happen anyways, is it?" Clark asked sadly into his sallad. Lois sighed.

"I don't know, Clark. Honestly, I think it's all just a bunch of misscommunication, but since you won't even try to find out, who knows? Maybe he wants to fuck you into next Sunday, maybe he just likes you as a friend. You not doing anything about it anyways, obviously," she said, sounding annoyed. "Either do it, or stop moping about it."

"Give me some helpful advice, Lois!"

"I *have been*, for the last two years. You don't listen anyways, so I've stopped doling my advice out for free!" she said, biting into her hamburger. "Don't say I haven't tried. You're on the razors edge. You

don't want to tell Batman you want to date him, because if he doesn't return your feelings, he'll shun you, and you want to tell Batman your feelings and have them returned! Now you're just standing and waiting, hurting from not being with him and scared to do anything. Except, you know, eating his food, playing with his kids, giving him a hand with them, et cetera. Frankly, I think you're stringing both of you along, and you should cut the shit."

"It's just so easy, you know?" Clark said, putting his fork down to lean his chin against his hand. "Once we get started talking, it flows so easily. He makes me laugh, and he's so smart and sharp and amazing."

"Ugh, I know. You repeat it like you're a scratched record," Lois groaned, rolling her eyes. "Tell him you love him and get it over with."

"But if I do-" Clark began, and Lois picked up his fork.

"Oh my *god*, Clark, sweetheart," she interrupted, her voice lovely as they met eyes. "If you keep talking about your huge crush on Batman, I'm going to poke my own eyes out. It's part of the adult life to date and love, but honestly, if you don't grow a pair of ovaries and fess up soon, I'm doing it *for* you."

"You wouldn't!" Clark hissed.

"I know where you keep your secret-boyband earpiece. Don't test me," Lois said firmly, waving the fork around dangerously. "Now, stop whining and eat your sallad. I need to go talk to a source I've got a meeting with soon, and I'm paying today, so hurry up."

All in all, borrowing two child-sized crash test dummies to make a point probably wasn't the sanest thing Bruce'd done these past two weeks. He was tired. He hadn't gotten to fight Talia about what happened to Cass. Justice hadn't been served, Batman hadn't been needed for any JL bullshit in almost two weeks, and the world wasn't trying to tear itself apart currently. Sue him.

Besides, Tim's eager face made it worth it.

It was almost three hours of driving Tim's car down the stairs before he realized he'd left Martha hanging on the line, and he immediately had to call off the experiment.

"Now, boys, we can agree you'd get very hurt, and you should never

try to drive your car down the stairs, right?" he said firmly, looking down at Jason's glittering eyes and Tim's excited nod. "So no driving down the stairs, unless you want to give Alfred a heart attack."

The look of defeat in their eyes was good. They could care less about getting themselves hurt, that was just fun, but hurting Alfred? A very valuable bargaining chip to make his young children see sense.

"Would that mean you're done with the dummies, Master Bruce?" came Alfred's call from the bottom of the stairs, and Bruce made a thumbs up at him. "Come fetch Master Damian, sir."

Bruce did as he was told, and then took off to go pick up his call from Martha. She'd hung up, and he called back quickly, letting Damian run around chasing Titus in his study.

"Martha, I'm sorry," he said the moment she picked up. "The kids tried to run a car down the stairs-"

"They did what?" came Clark's shocked exclamation, and Bruce paused.

"You're visiting your mother for lunch?" he questioned, looking over at the clock. It wasn't late enough that he'd be off work, but a little too late for lunch. "That's odd?"

"Finished the article I was writing early and Perry wanted to give one of the juniors a shot at the next assignment, so he ordered me to take off. Thought I'd come help Ma. Who tried to drive a car down the stairs?"

"Jason and Tim. I caught them just before they managed, and I've spent time demonstrating why it's dangerous," he stated.

"Is that Bruce?" he heard Ma Kent's shout in the background.

"Yes Ma," Clark called back, and in a moment, Bruce was back on the phone with Martha.

"Children are adventurous creatures," she chuckled when he told her about their antics. "See, what they need is a day runnin' around on a farm, not holed up in a mansion."

"It's called a mansion because it's big. I'm sure there'd be more trouble if it was a four bedroom house," Bruce argued.

"They could use the fresh air," Ma cajoled, and Bruce snorted as he saw Titus settle down in front of an armchair, Damian sitting down next to him.

"You just want to hear small feet on floorboards."

"Well, it's not like Clark's going to be contributing to that any time soon!" she muttered.

"No? I'm sure Clark will settle down soon. He's still young," Bruce said distantly. He couldn't really exactly pin down how that made him feel, so he boxed whatever it was up, shoved it into the back of his head, and told it to shut up.

"That's really not the issue," Ma sighed, and was just about to ask what she meant when there was the ding of an oven-timer. "Oh, that's the pie! I'll have Clark bring some over tonight, alright? At least think about bringing them around and making an old lady happy. Bye bye dear."

"Bye," Bruce said and hung up. He peeked over the edge of the desk, and found Damian had decided his nap was best taken on top of Titus. Bruce couldn't really blame him.

Martha was good. She was, really. The Kent property was pretty out in the sticks of Smallville, which was really saying something. It had kept Superman secret for eighteen years, at least. The boys complained a lot about not being allowed to run around on their own whenever they went outside. They complained about not getting any freedom, or sun. God knows Alfred could use the rest. The butler wouldn't say anything about it, but Bruce knew. Staying up late wasn't new for him, but getting up to change diapers had been a while ago, and he was much older now than he'd been then.

Bruce put Damian in his own bed, and left Titus with him, grabbing the baby monitor before going back down to the cave, where Dick was on the balance beam, standing on his hands.

"Looking good, Robin," Bruce said, almost automatically, and Dick flipped himself back up to standing to grin brightly at him, making the skin around his eyes crinkle lovingly. He was wearing the blue and black leotard they'd bought at the beginning of this mess, and he looked like a true little gymnast in it. Bruce's heart jumped around in his chest at that familiar look, thinking back to all those first nights out in costume, how terribly unprotective the first batsuit was in comparison to the one he has now.

"Thanks, B," Dick chirped, doing a cartwheel on the balance beam.

"Shouldn't be doing it without a spotter though. Speaking of, how did you get in here?" he asked bemusedly, stepping down onto the squeaky blue mats.

"Titus has his own code to get in through the clock," Dick said happily. "I just wanted to balance a bit. Wasn't gonna do anything fancy."

"I've had the safety talk with your brothers, it seems, but not with you. Never go on the beam with no one around. If you get hurt, you'll give Alfred a heart attack," Bruce said, arching an eyebrow at Dick, who just smiled wider.

"Don't worry, Bruce, I'm fine! You're here now, right?"

"You have a hurt foot," Bruce reminded him, to which Dick scoffed.

"You'll catch me," he said, with such certainty in his voice, it hurt Bruce more than seeing him in his leotard.

"Of course I will," Bruce said, feeling slightly choked. "That doesn't mean you should be practicing on a hurt foot."

"It doesn't hurt that much. I don't think I sprained it or anything. Just twisted it," Dick shrugged, doing a flip on the beam and wobbling slightly. Bruce was there with a hand before he even knew he was doing it.

"Be careful," he said sharply, and Dick just smiled at him, gripping his arms and getting chalk all over them.

"See? You got me," Dick reassured him. Bruce stared for almost a solid minute, and then he lifted Dick off the beam. "Hey, mister, I wasn't done!"

"Shush," Bruce said, hugging Dick to him. Any other thirteen-year-old boy would probably immediately recoil, but Dick just wrapped his arms tightly around Bruce's neck like a much smaller child, and Bruce commited this very hug to memory down to the last detail, the chalk he was bound to get in his hair, the way Dick linked his feet together around his back. "Yeah, you're done," he murmured.

"Not fair!" Dick whined as Bruce forced himself to put Dick back down on his two springy feet.

"I have to talk to Cassandra, all the way over there, where I won't be able to spot you. You need a shower and the others baked cookies I'm sure you'd love," Bruce said pointedly. Dick pouted, before smiling his performer's smile, the one that just made you want to pinch his cheeks.

"Just let me show you one trick! Just one!" he held a finger up convincingly, doing the excited little wiggling of his torso he'd always done when he was too excited as a young Robin. Bruce sighed to himself.

"Alright. One trick," he allowed, and Dick was back on the beam before he'd even finished the sentence. He procceded to do two handstands in a row and a lever at the end. Bruce clapped appreciatively, and Dick beamed. "Now, shower, cookie, go."

"Fine, naggy-Batman," Dick sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes, before he hopped off the sparring mats, undoing the wrapping on his foot as he went.

Bruce sighed to himself. As much as he could admit he enjoyed having seen their young faces again, he sort of wanted his older, more responsible children back. Speaking of responsible children.

Sliding the curtain aside from the designated med-bay of the cave, Bruce found Cassandra sitting up in her bed, reading a book. She had an IV helping with her dehydration, and there were circles under her eyes, but she looked better now than she'd done when he'd checked up on her last night. Now she just looked tired. She was watching a show on her computer, but had looked up before he'd entered the med-bay.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Shaky," Cassandra said, holding up a hand to show him the trembling.

"Not in pain?" She shrugged in response, which he nodded back at. Cassandra could rival even him in not caring about injuries. She'd get shot and only discover it when someone else pointed it out. "Want me to get anything?"

Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

"No. Sit. Talk," she said, and Bruce smiled at her, sitting down by her bedside. She placed the computer up on the medical trolley next to her, turning on her side with a blank face. Bruce tapped his fingers on

the armrest, a frown on his face as he thought for a minute.

"How would you feel about... Us leaving the manor?" he asked. Cassandra quirked an eyebrow at him. Neither negative or positive, but curious. "Martha Kent. Remember her?"

"Nice," Cassandra agreed softly, nodding.

"Yes. She's offered us a day at her farm. I don't want to leave you unprotected, but I don't think you're strong enough to go either," Bruce said, laying it out for her. "You're still very weak from the poisoning. You're only now allowed things other than broth."

"You should go," she said. "The boys. Trapped."

"They've made it very clear to me how trapped they feel," Bruce agreed. "I just want them to be safe. I want *you* to be safe."

"Have Alfred. Steph. Babs," Cassandra pointed out, curling up and tucking her hand underneath her cheek. "I'll be fine."

Bruce thought about that for a moment. Alfred was well-trained in these sorts of situations, of course. He didn't doubt his skill, he was just... Anxious about leaving Cassandra alone in the house.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, worry-wart," she said with a squint before closing her eyes completely, a word he'd never heard leave her mouth but probably Dick's. Bruce scoffed.

"You know what I do think we could do?" he murmured. Cassandra blinked her eyes back open as he stroked a hand over her cool cheek. "Move you up to your bed. Would you like that?" Cassandra nodded again, looking like a sleepy child and not the rather alarmingly sharp young woman she really was. "Yeah, we'll fix that for you later tonight, okay?"

"Thank you," she murmured. Bruce hummed in response, and Cassandra reached out to trace the spot between his eyebrows. "Worried?"

"I think I'm entitled," Bruce pointed out. Cassandra shrugged, and looked at him for a while before biting her lip. "What's the matter?"

"You worry me," she told him.

"Me? I'm not the one Talia poisoned."

"Sort of am," she said. Bruce narrowed his eyes at her, but Cassandra said nothing in response to it. She took his fingers in hers, and stared at them for a moment, before clearing her throat. "Do you love me?"

"Of course," Bruce replied silently. Cassandra was the one of his children who didn't hate him at least a little, which in itself was sort of depressing, but Bruce cherished it very much. He hadn't managed to ruin her yet, or their relationship. She nodded at that.

"Tim?"

"You know I do."

"Damian?"

"Yes. Where are you-"

"Alfred?" she pressed, interrupting him and half-sitting up, supporting herself with her elbow. He blinked.

"Cassandra-"

"Dick?"

"Why do you-"

"Jason?" she asked again, speaking louder than she had for weeks. There was something in her eyes that made her look very firm and serious. Bruce saw it, and sat back in the chair. He might as well let her finish wherever she was going with this.

"Yes."

"Then why not Clark? You've known him for longer than me," she pointed out.

"He's a friend. I enjoy his company," Bruce said. "You're my daughter. All the people you've tossed at me are family. There's a difference between family and Clark."

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"It's like with Diana," Bruce clarified. "She's a friend, and an ally, but she isn't family. Just like Clark isn't family, but a treasured ally."

Cassandra smacked the bed angrily next to her, surprising Bruce. He kept forgetting how fast she really was when she wanted to be. They hadn't sparred for a while. She had that look on her face that she always had when she understood something perfectly but couldn't find the words to let the rest of them know. It was a look of pure frustration that Bruce recognized all too well.

"Family *is* Clark," she said firmly.

"He's been acting like it lately, sure," Bruce conceeded, and Cassandra made an irritated growly noise that spoke volumes of how pissed she currently was at not being able to telepathically tell him exactly what she meant. "Maybe we should pause this until you've figured out how to get it in words?" he suggested.

"Phone. I want Steph," she agreed, holding a hand out. Bruce held up a finger.

"I'll call Steph, you focus on getting your pulse back down. I didn't realize having this conversation would upset you so much, or we wouldn't have had it. Breathing exercises, right now, or we won't be able to move you tonight," he commanded, and Cassandra rolled her eyes but slid back down onto her back, closing her eyes and forcing her breathing and heartbeat back into a slower pace.

Bruce watched her for a moment before he called Steph and asked her to come over, and prepare to stay over.

Bruce had just about finished discussing with Alfred how he'd like the new set-up in Cassandra's room when Damian woke up from his nap. Whilst Alfred went to set that up, Bruce picked Damian up and moved the playpen into the dining room. Practically the whole floor was littered with toys Bruce had no clue how they'd gotten there, and he was trying to make this part of Alfred's life easier for the moment.

He'd just started picking stuff up with the still slightly sleepy Damian on his hip when Clark called.

"What's the matter?" Bruce asked.

"Nothing. I was just checking up on you. Are the kids being insufferable?" he joked.

"It's currently pretty suspiciously quiet, but no. Nothing too dangerous

since last time we spoke," he sighed, finding one of Tim's skirts and Jason's hoodie lying on two chairs' seats. Alfred had firmly said clothing should be kept off the floor, and the boys had obviously taken that to heart by putting the clothing *near* the floor, but not on it. He tossed them over the back of the chairs to remember to take them upstairs again.

"You never know with your kids. Well, I've finished helping Ma out, so I thought I'd be back early today. Want me to pick up anything on my way back?" Clark asked distantly.

"Night-diapers. And don't dare drop that pie slice Martha promised me," Bruce said very firmly. Clark laughed on the other side of the line.

"Don't worry. I'll protect it with my life," Clark swore. "And now it's actually a whole pie. Ma felt bad that the kids wouldn't be getting any, so she baked another one."

"I must remember to thank her for her kindness and contributing to my children getting cavities," he said absent-mindedly as he settled Damian on his hip more firmly, jamming his phone between his shoulder and cheek. He reached for the actual baseball bat lying underneath the bureau, and held it in his hand. He really didn't like these toys he couldn't recall buying popping up everywhere.

"It's American food at it's finest, Bruce. They can brush their teeth like good little boys, or they won't get any pie at all."

"Cla'?" Damian asked, reaching for the phone. "Cla'!"

"**Yes, Damian, it's Clark**," Bruce agreed, leaning the bat against one of the walls in the dining room and kicking one of Damian's balls out of the room. He shifted so that he could pick the phone out from it's uncomfortable position, and heard someone else move into the room. "Clark, prepare for toddler-yelling."

"What?" was all he heard before he held the phone to Damian's ear. Damian immediately yelled for Clark, and Bruce turned around to look at Roy standing in the doorway and yawning.

"**Sit right there Damian**," Bruce murmured as he sat Damian down in the playpen. The toddler immediately began blabbering about what Bruce assumed was colors and shapes, because that's what it sounded like, sort of, except sped up and in baby-Farsi.

"Harper," Bruce said, smoothing his features out. Roy stretched his arms over his head, showcasing very red armpit-hair in his grey, washed-out tanktop.

"Night-diapers, huh? Batman and Superman running a daycare center. Never thought I'd see the day. You hiring? I could use the money," Roy said, looking and sounding amused. Bruce silenced him with a glare, and Roy held his hands up in defense. "Just saying. I'm great with kids. Even kids who aren't Jase."

"There have been two occasions in which you have failed to watch them, where they could've been harmed. *Were* harmed," Bruce stated lowly.

"The fight thing was only fifty percent on me. Just saying. And the car thing? I wish I was awake for that. I'm sure Tim tried to make it extra dramatic," he grinned. "Were they holding hands for the effect?"

"They would've been injured, and you, the designated baby-sitter, weren't there," Bruce growled at him, stepping closer to intimidate, and also to take in the calculating look on the archer's face.

"You got them, right? Disaster averted. It's not like you're paying me to watch your kids. Just asking me to play nice in your Batman-voice. That only goes so far as incentive. I was up all night helping Spoiler and Batgirl on patrol. Covering your ass in two places," he challenged.

The problem with Roy was that he was a little too much like Ollie. Couldn't shut up, couldn't control himself well enough, cared too much about unimportant things and too little about the important things. Too volatile, too much like Ollie for Ollie's comfort. Too little like him for Bruce's comfort. At least Ollie had a purpose in life that wasn't 'shoot shit up'.

"Yes, I read that in their reports, which is why I wasn't expecting to see you here today. Seeing as I'm not using my... Batman-voice, that means you have more incentive than that, also known as Jason Peter Todd."

Roy made a face like he was swishing that thought around in his mouth, and then he frowned.

"It's prime black-mail material."

"It's sentimental."

"We're best friends. I don't know what that means to *you*, but to me it means you take part in your bro's sketchy shit, take care of your bro when he gets turned into a ten-year-old, and tell your bro to stop being an asshole sometimes. These all accidentally coincided this time, so I'm doing my best friend duties," Roy declared. Then he scratched the inside of his elbow, a gesture Bruce connected to recovering addicts, and shrugged. "Gotta do whatcha gotta do."

"And yet, you're not protecting him."

"It's like you've never met a ten-year-old. Do you know how many Jay-related accidents I've averted during my time here? Like, eleven. I keep telling him he's being an asshole, he won't do things like try to climb on top of your huge penny in the cave, or put tooth-picks in nerf-bullets so they'd do their job."

"How do they keep getting into the batcave?" Bruce said to himself, to which Roy shrugged.

"You told them not to. That always makes kids, like, ten times more motivated. Also, *you* raised them." Bruce grunted, but to Roy, it sounded sort of proud. "Right. Well, I'm gonna go catch Dick and Tim before they climb onto the roof."

"Why are they going on the roof?" Bruce asked, blinking twice. Roy spun his navy blue cap around on his head, smiling sweetly.

"I think it's because the view is pretty, and it's a warm day. Also because they're little kids and you don't like it when they leave the house. So, obviously, they're going to leave the house."

Bruce grunted irritably, and picked Damian up from the floor, as well as his phone.

"**Say** 'bye' **to Clark, Damian**," Bruce cajoled, and Damian repeated 'bye' maybe four times before Bruce managed to wrestle the phone from his little hands and follow the whistling Roy outside through the veranda doors. "Clark?"

"Yeah?" Clark said, sounding sort of ridiculously happy just from listening to Damian talk.

"Speed up a little. They're doing things they shouldn't again, and I might need an extraction team," Bruce said distantly.

"Oh, geeze, yeah, I'll hurry," Clark said quickly before hanging up.

Bruce pocketed his phone, settled Damian on his hip, and looked up at the roof.

The three people on his roof were easy to spot. Dick's bright-green pants and orange-purple striped shirt were hard to miss, and Tim was wearing white tights with a purple skirt Stephanie had no-doubt given him, which was quite a contrast against the dark of the roof. The third figure was much more inconspicuous, with jeans, a black shirt, and combat boots.

"Hello Kon-El," Bruce said without raising his voice, eyes narrowed at the teenager sitting on his roof with Tim sitting between his legs, holding onto his knees, and Dick leaning over his shoulder. Immediately, the teenager flinched, eyes wide as he looked down on the ground.

"Oh shi- Hi!" Kon shouted back a little nervously, and Tim waved, whilst Dick tried to hide behind Kon's torso and broad shoulders. Obviously someone knew *exactly* what they were doing, and that they definitely shouldn't be.

"Broose, we're on the roof!" little Tim hooted happily.

"I see that," Bruce called back.

"Nice! I appreciate the effort it took to get up there. Gonna come down soon?" Roy shouted up.

"No!" Tim declared.

"In a minute!" Kon yelled.

"Hold on to Superboy," Bruce called to them.

"Why?" Tim yelled.

"Tactical reasons," Bruce replied, and Tim nodded very seriously, holding onto Kon's knees even firmer than before. "Where's Jason." It wasn't so much a question as it was a growled command.

"Reading in his room. See, since I called him out on how shitty of an idea it would be to climb the roof, he didn't do it," Roy said, bowing proudly. "No need to thank me."

"Was Tim, by any chance, in the room when you and Jason had this discussion? Much like when you saw Thelma and Louise?" Roy opened

his mouth, and then closed it again. Bruce internally groaned. "Of course he was."

"Hey, flyboy's the one who's up there with them," Roy said quickly.

"For your information, they were already up here when I flew in! I just thought I shouldn't let them fall off!" Kon called from the roof.

"Get down here," Bruce said irritably, and Kon gathered Tim up in his arms, and got Dick to hop up on his back before he floated down to the ground with them. "I thought we had this talk about safety a few hours ago, at *most*," Bruce said to his children as soon as they were on the ground.

"But the roof was nice and warm! And you could see almost all the way to the lake!" Tim said excitedly. Dick rubbed the back of his neck and toed the dirt in front of them, not meeting Bruce's eyes. Oh he *knew*, alright.

"And it was very dangerous! If Superboy hadn't been flying by, you might've fallen and made like the crash dummies!" Bruce said angrily, feeling sort of light-headed just thinking about seven-year-old Tim dropping from the fourth floor right into the rose-bushes.

"I'm not an idiot!" Tim declared haughtily.

"No, but you're also not as well-trained as you like to think you are," Bruce said back, making Tim stomp his little foot into the grass.

"I'm better than you think!" he said, even louder.

"That doesn't make going up on a roof any less dangerous!"

"We do it *all the time*!"

"As trained, professional adults," Bruce pressed. "Currently, you're none of those three." Tim's pout was outrageously cute, but Bruce could see that he was genuinely upset about Bruce not thinking them going on the roof was the coolest thing on the planet.

"Cla'!" Damian suddenly shouted happily, nearly making Bruce go deaf in one ear. He'd definitely inherited the sheer volume of Talia's voice, no doubt about it.

It was indeed Clark appearing in the blue sky above them, coming hurtling towards them quickly, with a pack of night-diapers

underneath his arm and a pie in the other hand.

"What's going on here?!" Clark exclaimed as soon as he touched down.

"Bruce is being unreasonable!" Tim accused. Oh, just because Bruce cared for their safety, he was now *unreasonable*? Of course. This wasn't new to him, after all. Being blamed for thinking about others safety, that is.

"Uh, Timbo, I'd just like to let you know that you're the one being unreasonable here," Roy pointed out.

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Well, the roof was fun, yeah, I'll admit," Kon said quickly, flipping Roy off behind Tim's back. "But it was pretty dangerous, so we're not going to do it again, are we Tim?"

"The roof?" Clark exclaimed. "Jesus! Is anyone hurt?"

"No," Dick finally piped up. Tim looked up at Kon, then Clark and then he turned his pout into a frown. He squinted angrily at Bruce.

"We're not going back up. *Right* Tim?" Kon repeated.

"Maybe," Tim said slowly. "Maybe not."

"I think it's time to take the walk you were promised," Bruce declared. "Clark, put the pie in the fridge and and grab Jason, we're moving out in two minutes. Hurry."

"Right away," Clark agreed, and disappeared as Tim turned away from Bruce in defiance. He restrained himself from rolling his eyes, and instead set Damian down in the grass. Bruce whistled loudly, and Titus appeared from the open veranda doors, his bark loud and deep.

In a moment, Clark and Jason appeared, and Dick helped Damian to his feet before they all took off on a walk in the stiflingly hot summer day.

After their walk, Alfred made them lemonade, and they all settled around Cassandra down in the med-bay, making sure Bruce had

granted his children the things they'd asked for. He was a little lost in thought when he heard the chirp of someone's phone. Since Kon immediately began patting his pockets, it had to be his.

The Superboy took one look at the screen, and moved toward Tim, before awkwardly freezing mid-movement.

"Oh, wow- Sorry, reflex to grab Tim and go when the team calls," he said a little sheepishly.

"Understandable," Roy chortled. "The two of you are practically attatched at the hip."

"It's gross, is what it is," Jason declared. Cassandra, who had a hand in his hair and was stroking a thumb down his ear, got a firm grip on him and tipped his head back.

"Don't say that," she warned, and Jason blinked with owlish eyes at her.

"Sorry," he muttered, and pleased, she let go of his hair again.

"Team calls?" Tim asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah, it means I've gotta go, babe," Kon said, dropping a kiss on Tim's forehead.

"Bu-but... I don't want Kon to leave," Tim said, and directed his big, wet eyes at Bruce. Bruce stared at his small son for three seconds, and then he turned a hard look at Kon.

"The team can handle one mission without you," he said, and Kon gaped.

"Wha- Clark?!" Kon exclaimed, seeking support, but Clark was also exposed to Tim's big, wet eyes, and oh boy.

"I- Oh god," he said, holding a hand up, as if trying to ward it off.

"You don't want to stay?" Tim asked, directing those big, wet eyes at Kon now instead as he hopped off Cassandra's bed, and Kon dropped to his knees in front of his best friend.

"Hey, no, Tim, that's really not it. I just... Have chores to do at home, and homework to do, and superhero stuff to do, like, right now," he explained, and Tim's lower lip trembled. "I- oh god, why do you have such a cute face!"

"You think I'm cute?" Tim asked, switching tactics to a smile. Kon sighed, and looked to the heavens for strength.

"Yes, of course, you're adorable, and I'm sorry I have to go! I promise I'll be back, alright? Pinkie promise," he said, stretching his pinkie out. It took a little bit, but then Tim intertwined their pinkies, and Kon grinned. "Awesome. See ya in a bit!"

"Good luck!" Tim said softly, and Kon winked at him before disappearing out the curtains.

Stephanie showed up with a duffle bag right before dinner, and supported Cass when they moved her upstairs to her own room, along with Roy. Then they all ate dinner together, before Roy took off. Everyone was allowed a piece of Martha Kent's pie, which was served in the sitting room, with Bruce feeding Damian a small piece which he seemed to like very much. However, Bruce wasn't an idiot, and knew that if he gave Damian anymore sugar, he'd never go to sleep again.

By the time Bruce had finished his own piece, Jason had cinnamon and apple all over his face, and Tim too. Stephanie was also guilty of sloppy eating, but Bruce ignored that in favor of draping Damian over his lap and rubbing his back in circles until he settled down.

"Boys," he said slowly when Damian was resting against his stomach. "Does the name Martha Kent ring any bells for you?"

"Martha's your mom's name," Dick said, shoveling pie into his mouth without abandon.

"Kent is Clark's name," Jason tacked on.

"That's Kon's gramma," Tim said, without a doubt, and loaded a small piece of pie onto his fork. "She made this pie."

"So she's Clark's mom," Dick deduced.

"She is," Clark agreed, giving Bruce an odd look. "What about Ma?"

"She's offered... Spending a day on her farm," Bruce said slowly. All eyes went on him.

"Would that mean we got to be outside without anyone having to grab us as soon as we got a bit out of range?" Jason asked quickly.

"The farm is fairly large and secluded, and also not under constant

scrutiny, so yes, there might be a possibi-"

Whatever else Bruce had planned to say was drowned out immediately by a chorus of loud, young voices.

"Yes! Awesome!" Dick exclaimed.

"When can we go, when can we go, when can we go?" Tim shouted, hopping up into Bruce's lap with wide, happy eyes. Damian stirred, and gave Tim a very critical look.

"Fuck yeah!" Jason said heartily, and immediately, Clark scolded him.

"Settle down," Bruce said with a reluctant smile at their antics, and got Tim to sit down on his butt in Bruce's lap. "I was just asking out of curiousity. I'm not promising anything. We'd have to get up very very early to get to Kansas, and might get home very very late."

"Very late and very early are the same thing anyway," Dick said cheerily, bouncing in his seat, to the point where he tumbled off. Once on the floor, he did a little somersault and then a cartwheel, much to Damian's amusement. Immediately, the toddler demanded he be set down, and that Dick teach him. The other children immediately joined in, even Steph.

"So... The farm?" Clark said a little smugly, nudging Bruce's side with his elbow as he sat down in the same couch as him.

"It's a bit of a favor, actually, so don't do that," Bruce said.

"Favor? To Ma?" Clark asked with a surprised bout of laughter.

"She apparently longs for grandchildren," Bruce said with a pointed eyebrow-raise at him. Clark promptly choked on air.

"Yeah, she-uh. She said that to you?" he said, the blush rising on the back of his neck. Bruce, however, looked over at Jason doing a perfect cartwheel, and Damian getting help to do a somersault from Dick.

"Mmm. Don't worry though. You're still young. You'll find someone," Bruce said distantly, patting Clark on the knee and wondering distantly why that felt odd to say.

"Yeah," Clark said softly, watching Bruce's long lashes and his soft smile as he watched his children mess around on the carpet. "I hope so."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the overwhelming support!! You're all amazing and I hope this little silly story cheers you up!!! <3<3

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later that night, he set everything up for their little escapade tomorrow, packing Damian's diaperbag, and he hadn't really reflected on how much stuff went into taking care of four boys of various ages. He brought several changes of clothes, Dick's leotard, and spent the majority of the evening fussing around and grabbing everything they might need for an over-day trip to Kansas.

They'd be taking the batplane, since he couldn't just stuff them on a commercial jet, and using his private jet meant filing a flight-plan and trying to hide all four of them from a pilot, so that was a no on that. Clark had offered to fly them, which Bruce hadn't even considered, since it wasn't going to happen. No chance.

The boys slept in his bed, and Clark in his own apartment, but he texted Bruce late into the night, until Bruce realized it was time to stuff them into the plane and go.

Before he did anything, he went in to kiss Cassandra's forehead. Stephanie was curled up in her bed next to her, and they met eyes briefly, before Bruce left again. Alfred helped carry the unconscious boys to the jet in the cave, and was then unhelpful enough to take a few pictures whilst Bruce tried to stuff the duffle into the back compartment.

The boys were asleep in the cockpit during liftoff, Dick and Tim sharing a seat and Jason on his own. Damian was strapped onto Bruce's front with a baby carrier he definitely wouldn't be able to wear the moment Damian woke up.

The flight to Kansas took almost three hours with commercial, and the batplane only went a little faster than that, cutting the time to two hours, twenty minutes. During the time when the boys were still asleep, Bruce checked around to see if anyone had heard from Zatanna yet. Not a peep, apparently. He was getting a little impatient. Magic made people hard to find, annoyingly enough, and Bruce couldn't be away long enough from the kids to track her down. So,

instead, he had to keep waiting.

He gave her two more days, and then he was going out to track her down.

The first to wake was Jason. He was so quiet about it that when his little hands gripped the back of Bruce's chair, Bruce nearly startled. Instead, he gave the clock a peek on the dashboard and raised his eyebrows at Jason.

"Didn't expect you to be awake so soon," he relayed. Jason, who was still in his pyjamas with dinosaurs on it, rubbed his eyes and shrugged.

"When's breakfast?" he mumbled and slid his leg over Bruce's armrest, nestling himself up in his lap. Bruce, confused and slightly astonished, slid down in his chair a little, shifting Damian's small legs out of the way as Jason curled up against him, yawning.

"When we get to the Kent farm."

"Are we there yet?"

"No. We have about an hour left."

"Okay."

Jason seemed pretty intent to go back to sleep right on top of Bruce, head on his shoulder and everything. Bruce accepted that, and tried to go back to some semblance of work. He checked over Babs report, and watched some security footage that was thought to be Killer Croc, but it was dark and gritty and hard to tell. The camera was positioned near a sewer, however, which always made everyone wearing Batman's symbol cautious.

After a moment, it was clear Jason couldn't get back to sleep. His eyes were still closed, but his body wasn't entirely relaxed like it would've been in sleep, and Jason's eyelids were twitching a little bit.

"You don't need to go back to sleep, Jason," Bruce pointed out, and one eye cracked open. "I brought some of your books if you'd like to read."

Jason shook his head slightly, and instead looked up into the bright blue sky above them.

"Is the sky always this blue outside of Gotham?" he asked, and Bruce was achingly reminded of how young Jason was.

"No. Like Gotham, it rains, and snows, and hails. The sky above Gotham is like this all the time too, it's just covered by clouds most of the time,"

"Makes sense, I guess. Is Kansas like Gotham?"

"It's practically it's polar opposite," Bruce promised. "Quiet and clean and bright skies."

"That makes sense then, that Clark comes from Kansas," Jason decided, in that voice Bruce had learned to associate with child-logic. A 'this makes sense because logic' voice that Tim used a lot nowadays.

"Because he's sunny?"

"No, because you're from Gotham and you're like Gotham. It makes sense that Clark, who's from Kansas, would be like Kansas."

"Hmmm," Bruce said, not entirely sure what Jason meant by that.

They sat in silence for a bit more, Jason fiddling with the excess strap on Damian's baby-carrier distantly, before opening his mouth, and then closing it again.

"Yes Jason?" Bruce inquired quietly, glancing down at Jason out of the corner of his eye. Jason pressed his lips together.

"Nothin'," he muttered, fiddling with the strap again. Bruce let out a breath, not entirely unlike a sigh.

"Tell me. I can guarantee whatever it is you've done, we've had worse fights and I've been angrier about something else you've done. Whatever it is-"

"Not somethin' like that," Jason pouted. "Why you gotta assume it's something I've done?" When Bruce shot him a raised eyebrow out of the corner of his eye, Jason rolled his eyes. "It's not that, alright?"

"What's the matter then?" Bruce asked, now slightly worried. Jason bit his lip, thinking it over for a moment. Also a cause for concern: Jason seriously thinking through whatever he was about to say to Bruce.

"Cassie says Damian's mom hurt her. Talia. I know her, don't I?" he asked, eyes intent. Bruce opened his mouth, closed it again, and tilted

his head to the right, away from Jason's head.

"Yes," he admitted. "I don't really know to what extent."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know how well you know each other," Bruce repeated. Jason nodded.

"How do I know her?" he asked curiously. Bruce felt a lump in his throat coming on just from thinking back to those first few years after Jason's death. He had very good memory, and Jason's body flashed in his mind like a vivid, solid picture. Bruce resisted the redundant need to shake his head to get it out.

"She... Helped you get on your feet after an injury."

"Really? She poisoned Cass, why would she want to help me?"

"Talia always has very odd reasons for things," Bruce relayed.

"How long did she help me for?"

"I think she sometimes helps you now, even."

"Really? Why would-" Jason cut himself off, and Bruce looked down at his son looking up through the glass ceiling with an alarmed look on his face.

"What?"

"Oh. I- nevermind," Jason muttered, his cheeks turning pink as he scrambled out of Bruce's lap, swinging his leg back over the armrest to get back to his own seat. "I'm just gonna- Go read a book."

Bruce raised an eyebrow at his son, but let him go. Whatever he'd remembered, he obviously hadn't wanted to share. He'd always assumed Jason and Talia's relationship was a bit of a messy brother-sister situation, but he hadn't any clues to direct him to any conclusions. Their messages were short, and they used burner phones in the beginning, but mostly Talia provided him with enough guns and training that he could stake his own territory out in Gotham. That was probably ruined now, unless that was what Roy was patrolling.

However, this Jason was ten years old and blushed at Kon giving Tim a kiss on the cheek, so you never knew.

When they were getting closer, Damian woke up and immediately demanded he be let out of the carrier. While Bruce argued about safety and how it was better to keep him there, Damian undid a clasp and neatly tumbled out into his lap with a determined look on his face. Bruce gave up trying to explain things to a toddler, and instead read a book for him, and gave him something to chew on and something to play with.

They landed in the woods near the Kent farm half an hour later, where Bruce had gotten Clark to park his beat-up pickup. Immediately, Dick and Jason clambered into the truckbed in the back and refused to move. Bruce had learned that he won a lot less arguments with logic nowadays and mostly with bribery. Currently, he was bribe-less.

Dick and Jason were allowed to ride in the truckbed if they kept arms and legs inside the truck at all times and promised to stay low. The little grassy spot where Bruce parked his batplane was strategically placed about a mile from the Kent farm, where there were no big roads nearby, and so he wasn't too worried. Tim thought his brothers were idiots who refused the safety and cool of sitting *inside* the car. Damian was mostly just fascinated by the fields surrounding them, and was whiny all the way over because he just wanted to go outside.

Finally, finally, Bruce pulled up to the Kent Farm, and stepped out of the car. He helped Tim down and out of the car, and then set Damian on his shoulders. Bruce needed two good hands to get both Dick and Jason back on the ground, and Damian would probably run off the moment he was set down on his own two feet. Dick shouldered the diaper bag and Bruce the duffle, and then they all stopped and took a look around.

The white little two-floored farmhouse was a far cry from the manor they were all used to, but Bruce had a certain place in his heart for the inside of Clark's childhood home, the home-made quilts and old couch and warm kitchen. The barn stood a few yards off to the left of the house, newly repainted earlier that year, and the chicken pen was just outside to the right of the house, the patches of berries and potatoes behind that. The property was dotted with some large trees who were looking a little dried out from the heat wave currently putting pressure on the whole mid-west. Bruce took a deep, Kansas-fresh breath, taking in the clear Kansas sky, the huge fields spreading out in front of them, the barn, the clucking chickens.

"Remember what we all said yesterday," Bruce said as he breathed out,

plucking the dazzled Damian off his shoulders and redistributing him onto a hip. When he only recieved mute, not very interested nods, he sighed. "Say it for me."

"Listen to and respect Ma Kent," Dick began, holding up fingers to count on. "Don't hurt each other, the animals, or yourself."

"Listen to you," Tim added. "And don't break anything."

"Don't do dumb shit," Jason finished with a flourish.

"Good. And no cursing," Bruce said firmly.

"What? But what about if you bang your toe on something?" Tim argued, finally looking up at Bruce.

"Still no cussing. I'll allow a damn, but that's as far as I'm willing to stretch," Bruce told them all very seriously. Immediately they began to protest, but they were pretty quickly distracted by the rooster making a noise from the pen. Immediately, they were back to looking around curiously, and some a little uncomfortably.

There was the sound of a screen-door opening, and then a female voice called out.

"Goodmorning, Bruce! Hi boys!"

Bruce looked up from the huddle of children. Jason, who had probably never seen this much earth in the same place in his life, was clinging to Bruce's leg a little bit. Dick, who had grown up in little towns all over America like these, looked around with bright eyes. Tim, who had probably never left Gotham before, looked like he was on an alien planet, ready to explore and almost already out of Bruce's grabbing range. Damian looked like he'd never seen something as amazing as a chicken in his *life*.

All in all, things were going like he'd thought they would, so far.

"Hi Martha!" Bruce called over the yard. They were still in the driveway, whilst she was standing on the porch, hands on her hips and a welcoming smile. It'd been a while since he'd actually been to the farm. One time, when he and Clark had been arguing about something, he'd said something about Bruce never having done a day of honest work in his life, and immediately regretted it.

Bruce had, however, taken it to heart, and spent a weekend at the

Kent farm with an exasperated Clark telling him he really didn't need to be helping out with anything at all, he hadn't meant anything by it, honestly, Bruce, I know you do honest work all the time!

"Hurry out of the sun before you get scorched, city boy!" she teased, and Bruce rolled his eyes, but herded his precious little cattle to the porch, nearly tripping over Tim twice and Jason thrice.

"Boys, just- Dick, come back here!" Bruce called when Dick doubled back to take a look at the chickens. Guiltily, Dick started, and hopped up on the porch, beaming at Ma Kent.

"Hi Dick! Oh, gosh, you've shrunk like a wool sweater in the wash, the lot'a ya'll," she said incredulously, cupping Dick's cheek. "Jason, you're skin and bones! Aren't you feeding them, Bruce?"

"I now have four boys growing instead of just the two, so believe me, Martha, I'm feeding them," Bruce sighed, hiking the mesmerized Damian higher on his hip as the toddler gazed out over the pastures.

"**Cows!**" he said excitedly, very loudly into Bruce's ear.

"**Yes, I believe they have chickens and horses too. I promise we'll go check them out soon**," Bruce said soothingly to the now excitedly bouncing Damian, who was trying to crawl out of his arms.

"Well c'mon in, come. Where's Cassandra? Is she alright?" Ma asked worriedly as she opened the screen door to sweep them into Clark's childhood home.

"Cassie got beat up by Damian's mom, so she couldn't come," Tim told Ma as they trooped into the little hallway, and hopped out of their shoes. "You're Kon's grandma, right?" Martha gaped at him for a moment, and then she smiled.

"I sure am, sweetheart," she agreed, without any hesitation. Clark may have his doubts, but Martha Kent was a better woman than that. She lead them into the kitchen, and directed them to sit down.

"Kon says you're really nice and warm," Tim declared, and Martha laughed.

"Does he? I'll have to remember that. Would you boys like some breakfast?"

"Yes please," Jason said hurriedly. Then he quickly added "Ma'm."

"Oh, no need to call me Ma'm, Jason! You're an awfully polite little boy," she chuckled. "No, no, just Ma is fine. That goes for all of you, you hear Bruce?"

"Of course, Mrs. Kent," Bruce said, just to tease, and Martha looked to the high heavens with a sigh.

"Whatever will we do with you," she tutted, and the boys giggled, looking between the two adults. "Well, Clark's promised to make it home for lunch, but we'll have fun without him. You boys ever rode horses?"

"My circus used to have a horse I could stand on!" Dick declared.

"Oh, I don't know if Ruby and Sapphire will be up for that, but we could always ask," Ma chuckled as she began pulling out bowl after bowl of things from the pantry. She set down some glasses and plates on the table, and ordered the boys to go wash their hands.

"Nothing too extravagant for us, Martha. We'll stay out of your way," Bruce promised as all four of them disappeared into the bathroom, Dick carrying Damian on his hip and bouncing the toddler.

"Nonsense! It's really no trouble at all."

"At least let me pay for us," Bruce pressed, and Martha shot him a scolding look over her shoulder.

"Don't you dare. We've got a good harvest, and I'm not behind on any bills. I may not be as rich as you, but I sure can feed some young, hungry boys without trouble. Don't you worry your head about it," she said, coming forward to pat him on the cheek gently. "I've got some fresh strawberries and raspberries from the patches outside I think you'll like."

She moved over to the counter, where there was a bowl of freshly picked strawberries, and her skirt swished around her knees as she tucked a piece of graying red hair behind her ear. Ma began humming to herself as she plucked more fruits and berries out from the fridge, pouring them into separate bowls.

The boys returned, dutifully hopping onto their chairs and waiting patiently for Ma to dish out eggs and pancakes and cereal. One thing Alfred never could pull off making as delicious as Ma was pancakes. Of course, he called them 'American pancakes' and had only reluctantly learned how to make them because he realized it was an

efficient way to silence the hungry children. Ma's pancakes were fluffy and warm and Damian looked dazzled as Bruce gave him small pieces of his pancake.

There wasn't a child's seat, which Bruce had thought about before they left, and decided it was easier to keep Damian in his lap rather than drag along a child's seat. Damian was amenable enough about the whole thing, only resisting in the beginning because he was a bit morning-cranky. Nothing a little berry-mush and pancakes couldn't fix.

After breakfast, the boys were put to work on the dishes, which Bruce found very amusing. Ma was thorough and told them the importance of hard work as they tried to skip on some dishes to go outside and play. She was better than him at keeping them in line, for now. Soon someone would stage a mutiny, and Bruce would have to get them back under control again.

Finally, the dishes were clean and dry and put away, and the boys immediately made for the door. Bruce got up, wiping Damian's small, sticky hands off, before going out on the porch, looking out onto the Kent property. It was late summer, which made for some spectacular heat during the day. He'd have to catch his kids and slather them in sunscreen; with how little sunlight they were getting nowadays, a single day in Kansas would definitely turn them into little lobsters, and the last he wanted to do was deal with sunburned, whiny children.

For now, though, he watched the fields, the gentle swaying in the slight breeze. Tim and Jason had quickly found the chickens and tired of them, deciding instead that the tree to the right of the farmhouse was a spectacular climbing spot.

"Isn't he just the prettiest boy?" Martha cooed at Damian as she too came out on the porch, and Damian, who had never expressed shyness in front of a stranger before, hid his face in Bruce's neck.

"He's... Being a little shy," Bruce realized, and patted Damian's back. "**Damian, this is Clark's mother.**" Damian looked at her, and then looked up at Bruce, his soft, young features anxious. "**What's the matter, little prince?**"

"**Is mama mad at me?**" Damian asked a little nervously.

That had been something that crossed Bruce's mind earlier on. Any child put into a new environment with new people would cry for

someone familiar, such as their mother, but Damian had done no such thing over the two weeks they'd spent as children. He'd only ever mentioned his mother once, to say that she smelled nice. Other than that, he hadn't said a word about it. However, Damian would also rather have trouble sleeping than ask for a comforting toy, so Bruce wasn't entirely sure how Damian aged two was doing with sentimentality and getting attached.

"**No. Why would you ask that?**" Bruce questioned, and Damian looked at Ma Kent again, frowning in a manner eerily reminiscent of Talia. Ma Kent smiled at him encouragingly.

"**Baba, this woman isn't a warrior. I'm only with nurses when mama's mad**," Damian said worriedly.

"Is he alright, Bruce?" Ma Kent asked worriedly. Bruce gaped incredulously at his son, and put his hand on the back of Damian's head, feeling his heart wrench with the uncomfortably unusual look of confusion and worry on his son's face.

"**No, Damian, mama isn't mad at you. This is Clark's mother. She isn't a warrior, but that doesn't make her a nurse. You're here with me, not your mama. I would never give you away to be with someone else. Just family**," Bruce promised immediately. "**Never anyone else. Okay? This woman is a friend. Family.**"

"**Oh**."

"**Would you like to say hello?**" Bruce asked after a moment of silence. Damian waved a little from his arms, and Ma smiled warmly and waved back.

"Oh, he's such a little beam of sunshine!" she laughed. "Let him down, we'll go look at the chickens. Would you like that, Damian?"

"**Chickens?**" Damian inquired at his father, and Bruce set him down on his own two feet, making the toddler stand there in shock for a moment.

"Chickens," he agreed in English. "C'mon, let's go."

He helped Damian hop down the porch stairs, and then shooed the little rascal off to look at the chicken pens. Ma followed, and within a moment, Damian was leaning on her knee, helping her feed the chickens right out of his hand and giggling loudly. Bruce knew that they'd take to each other.

Tracking Dick down was easy. He was with the horses, soothing an old mare as he took her out of her pen, and Bruce raised an eyebrow at him

"Think you can really stand on poor old Ruby?" he asked amusedly, and Dick looked up at him with a challenging Robin-grin from underneath his fluffy hair.

"Wanna bet, old man?" he asked. Bruce scoffed.

"No. But I'll spot you," he offered, and Dick beamed at him.

"C'mon Ruby!" he exclaimed happily, tugging on her reins and clicking his tongue. The old mare gave Bruce a suspicious look, but followed the happily bouncing kid out of the barn.

Ma plyed the boys full of sweets and drink whenever she could, and those were the only times they were all still enough that Bruce could slather sun-screen all over them. Jason and Tim's cheeks had already been turning red by the time he'd caught them, but Damian and Dick both seemed unperturbed. Damian was required to wear a sunhat when the noon heat really started, which he absolutely *despised*, and screamed bloody murder about until Ma Kent took him to sit on the porch swing in the shadow.

Well there, he pouted like the true little toddler he was, and refused to talk to Bruce if he so much as *looked* at that sun hat again, so Bruce gave up and let him sit in Ma's lap and get coddled. Entirely unconcerned about his cranky baby since he was in such good hands, Bruce took the other boys into the cow pasture, where Jason spent a full ten minutes trying to tip Rosie over. They were lucky the animals on the farm were so patient, or one of the kids would've been injured by now.

Dick and Jason helped Ma make a lovely picnic lunch, which they set up outside underneath one of the apple trees in the shadow, so Damian could get out of wearing his sunhat.

Just before they were about to dig in, Bruce saw something up in the sky out of the corner of his eye. Since Jason, Dick, and Tim were still his children, however young, their eyes immediately snapped to the figure too.

"Clark!" Jason shouted, hopping up on his feet along with his

brothers.

"Hi guys!" Clark exclaimed happily, catching Tim and swinging him up on his hip before the little boy could crash into his legs. He caught Dick just as he crashed into his legs, grinning, and Jason jumped up on his back before he could catch him.

"Guess what we've done today!" Tim demanded, leaning against Clark's shoulder. Clark laughed, correcting Jason's positioning on his back so he was better situated.

"Fed the chickens?" he inquired.

"Yeah! And the cows, and the horses, and Ma let us go riding on Ruby!" Jason cheered, wrapping his arms around Clark's neck for support as the man began walking towards the picnic blanket.

"Boys, let the hostage go," Bruce called as they came closer.

"It's fine," Clark promised, theatrically dragging his footsteps as the boys piled on top of him giggled.

"Hmmm," Bruce said, giving Tim a stern look, and reluctantly, the boy slipped out of Clark's grip and onto the ground, dashing back over to the food.

"Hey Jason, wanna take a ride?" the reporter asked, gripping both of his legs and boosting up into the air a full foot, at least, making Jason's eyes widen and making Bruce's heartrate pick up. There was a difference between flying around in the cave and in the sky.

"No flying! Lunch first," Ma said firmly before Bruce could even open his mouth and protest, and Clark dropped back down to the ground the moment the words were out of her mouth.

"You're right. Sorry Ma," he hurried to say, helping Jason get back on his feet. "I'll take you later, alright?"

"Awesome!" Jason declared, before taking his seat again too.

"We'll see," Bruce said warningly to Clark, who smiled sheepishly at him.

"Hi Ma," he murmured, stooping down to kiss her on the cheek. Immediately, Damian made little whining noises, waving his arms around like a little windmill to get Clark's attention, and he laughed,

picking Damian up out of his mother's lap. "Hi, little drama queen. Miss me?"

"Cla'!" Damian said cheerily, holding his cheek out for a kiss.

"Oh my god, you're so adorable," Clark said with absolute sincerity, practically with hearts for eyes as he kissed both of Damian's pudgy cheeks. Bruce watched out of the corner of his eye, and restrained a smile. Babies really were an effective bio-weapon.

The sandwiches Jason and Dick had helped make were good, and Martha showered them with enough praise about it to turn them both squirmy and red-cheeked with embarrassment. They'd also helped prepare the fruit-salad that was for dessert, but they were all getting impatient now, as children tend to do, and they merely shoveled it down before they took off again.

"Don't go where I can't see you!" Bruce called after them sternly. The last thing he needed was anyone tripping and getting a pitch-fork in the back.

"Or yell at us, yeah, we know!" Tim called over his shoulder, shoving Jason as he raced by him on his way to the barn.

"Hey!" Jason yelled, swiping after Tim, and Bruce sighed. Why none of his kids could manage to keep their hands off each other was really a bit of a mystery to him. He'd grown up as an only child, so he didn't really understand sibling dynamics on the same level as actual siblings.

"Boys," Bruce said warningly as Jason rolled his sleeves up. Oh boy. That was bad. Immediately, Bruce was on his feet, ready to reel them in. However, before he could get anywhere near them, Dick had made his way back to Jason, who stood there fuming. The little acrobat smiled at his brother, and then they were both facing away from them, so Bruce couldn't see what they were saying, or hear.

Finally, after about a minute, Dick's hand wrapped around the back of Jason's neck, and the tight fists Jason had made relaxed, his shoulders slumping as Dick lead him over to the barn where Tim was waiting.

"Do those two usually get along very well?" Martha asked, glancing at them whilst rolling Damian's blue ball over to the toddler.

"Not that well, I don't think," Clark said skeptically as Damian triumphantly tossed the ball back to Ma. Bruce only hummed, and sat

back down again.

"Shouldn't you be getting back to work soon?" he then questioned, glancing at his watch. Clark picked Damian up from the picnicblanket and put him on his lap, making the toddler squirm a little before he settled again, and got the ball from Ma.

"Trying to get rid of me?" the reporter inquired, mock-hurtfully. When Bruce only raised an eyebrow at him, Clark shrugged. "I said I had a family emergency."

"You're so lucky I own the Daily Planet, or you'd be out of a job by now," Bruce said without hesitation, and Clark grinned.

"Lucky me," he agreed, making Bruce roll his eyes at him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! I've been horrendously, brain-fryingly sick for the past week and I'm still not entirely recovered. Also, whatever your brain says is amazing writing when you've got a 39,5 degree fever, it's lying to you. Trust me.
Anyway, I have the next chapter all lined up and ready to go, so that'll be up early next week probably.
Hope you enjoy the farm shenanigans!

Chapter 18

When the boys were almost melting from the heat a few hours later, they asked Clark if there were any good places to swim around here. There was, apparently, a little lake a mile from the farm. After a severe amount of begging and nagging, Bruce grit his teeth and gave in, stuffing one of the Kent's battered little beach bags with towels and goggles and whatnot.

Ten minutes later, they were packed and ready to go, trooping their way down to the lake. The grass was a little dry around the gravel road they walked on, but the trees around them were green and huge, seemingly uncaring that it was blazing hot.

The little grove where the small lake was had it's fair share of trees and bushes too, but the sun was high enough that it pounded down on the sand lining the lake, and the dry grass nearby. The lake itself looked like someone had dug a hole in the ground to make room for maybe the foundations of a very large house, and if Bruce had to guess, he'd say this was the original intention.

However, you could tell it'd seen the use of teenagers over the years. There was a picnic table someone had brought over on one side of the lake, and a tree with a rope-swing protuding over the water.

Immediately, Dick took off for the rope-swing, with Tim hot on his heels. Jason stayed and helped Bruce lay down a beach blanket on the sand, and take out some beach toys. Ma had made them bring lots of lemonade, even though Bruce was convinced they wouldn't last long out by the lake anyway. Clark waded into the lake to keep track of the kids, pulling off his shirt to do so. Bruce caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, and told his body to stop being preposterous.

"Aren't you going to get in, Jason?" Bruce asked as Damian waddled over to the edge of the water. It was pretty shallow just there, so Bruce wasn't entirely worried, but he still kept a watchful eye. You never knew with Damian.

His ten-year-old made a circle with his toe in the sand, shrugging a little.

"Dunno. Got a... A weird feeling," Jason said, biting his lip. Bruce quirked an eyebrow at him, taking his eye off Damian for but a second.

"Okay. Want to tell me about it?" He shrugged again, and Bruce held back a sigh.

"Don't like it, is all," muttered Jason behind him. "Does the water look... Green to you?" Bruce froze up in his motions. Lazarus pit. Jason felt like he was seeing the lazarus pit. That would make just about anyone wary of jumping in.

"It looks clear to me," Bruce said, keeping his voice steady as he met Jason's eyes. Jason glanced between him and the water, poking with his toe in the sand further.

"Okay," he said, sounding a little skeptical, and Bruce ruffled his hair distantly. There was the splash of Tim flipping into the water from the rope-swing, and Bruce reached, without really looking, out to grab the back of Damian's very small swim trunks before he splashed face-first into the water.

At the toddler's immediate, angry shriek, Bruce picked him up, waded out a little bit, so that the water was maybe mid-calf on him, and then held Damian over the water, offering for him to splash around. Immediately, Damian's legs folded up like he was a froggy-newborn, and his huge eyes turned to his father in fear.

"Well Jason, you don't have to go in. It's just very warm," Bruce pointed out, looking over his shoulder at the pouty ten-year-old standing on the little sand strip behind him. "You can just stay here with me and Damian, if you'd like."

"C'mon Jason!" came Dick's shout from the water, where Clark and Tim were swimming along with him. Jason nodded, almost as if reassuring himself, and Bruce sighed a little to himself as the obviously slightly terrified Jason walked into the water, making a few strokes through the water.

"Sometimes I don't get any of you," Bruce told the tiny Damian in English as the toddler whined a little, sounding stressed. "**It's just the water, Damian. You wanted to touch it. Baba's got in his feet in it. Your brothers and Clark are in it. Just touch it with a foot. Okay? Just one foot.**"

Damian's little face still looked worried and nervous, but he looked at the water and then at Bruce, and then at the water again. Finally, one little leg stretched out to touch the water, and made a little splash when it went under the surface. That, Damian found very funny, so he did it again, using both of his legs to pedal as big splashes as he could

manage with his little feet.

Bruce smiled down at his happy toddler, and looked out at the other three, Dick standing on Clark's shoulders, obviously about to dive into the water. Tim was out of the water, climbing up to the rope-swing again, with Jason right behind him. Maybe this hadn't been such a terrible idea after all.

After a while, Damian demanded he be let down into the water, which Bruce only agreed to if they stepped closer to the beach again, so they did. Damian ran around in the shallows as Bruce settled on the beach, feeling the sand sticking to his feet. He closed his eyes and turned his face to the sun, feeling the beams heating his shoulders up already. He always was a ridiculously fast tanner, once he got outside.

There was the sound of Damian's little 'ouf' as he tripped, and Bruce opened his eyes again, helping Damian up on his feet and handing him another one of his balls before setting him free again.

"You should go in too, B!" came Dick's shout from the water. Bruce shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked out at them.

"I have to stay here with Damian. He can't swim," he reminded his son.

"I'll watch him," Dick promised, immediately swimming up to the task. "C'mon, Bruce, you've gotta be melting! Cool off!"

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked skeptically. It *would* be nice to take a little swim.

"Yeah, I'm sure! C'mon, little D, let's make a sandcastle," Dick urged as he crawled out of the water and up onto the little beach, plopping down in the wet sand and making a little hill out of it.

"Alright. Call if you need anything," Bruce said, and began to wade into the warm water. It really was very cooling. He took a deep breath and dove into the water, unconsciously making the dive as smooth and quiet as possible.

At that moment, Clark surfaced, using his hands to get the water out of his eyes. He glanced over at the shore, and did a double take.

"Dick, where'd Bruce go?" he asked incredulously, hoping that the other man hadn't gone back to the farm. No, that was silly. He'd never leave his kids alone like that.

"Water," was Dick's entirely uninterested response as he helped Damian pat down some sand into a plastic bucket. Clark looked around the lake, and caught an scarred, strong arm swiftly propelling someone forward.

He swam over, and was just about to reach for Bruce's ankle, just to tease, when his hand was expertly batted off by one agile foot. Bruce's head appeared overwater, eyes closed but face facing the sky.

"Decided to join us, huh?" Clark grinned. Bruce blinked the water out of his eyes and looked over, ready to snap at him, when he choked. Clark's usually dark hair was even darker now that it was wet, and he'd slicked it back to get it out of his face. His entire torso had droplets of water clinging to it, and it really didn't look that awful, now that there was no symbol to obscure it. The grin was sunny, but not one of the Superman-smiles, or the nervous Clark Kent-reporter smiles. Just pure Clark.

Finally, Bruce narrowed his eyes, an automatic response by now to his antics, and a good cover-up for his silence.

"Did you really just try to grab my foot and pretend you're a shark?" was what Bruce finally went with, a little worried about the increased rate of his heartbeat.

"It's fun," said Clark without any shame. "You should try it sometime. It makes life better." With those words, he smacked his palms flat down on the clear lake water, splattering water all over Bruce.

"Are you serious?" Bruce said incredulously, reluctantly feeling his lips twitch a little.

"No, that's what I'm telling you B, you gotta live and let live sometimes," Clark said patiently as Bruce swam a bit away from him. Clark swam after him, and kicked his feet in the water so the water splashed higher, making Bruce look like a drenched cat. The billionaire shook his head, and scoffed at him.

"You're an actual child," Bruce admonished. Clark splashed water at him again. "Clark. Stop it."

"What're you gonna do about it?" he challenged, feeling indeed sort of childish. He used to spend the summers here when he was a teenager, swinging from the trees and splashing water at the girls sunbathing. Of course, Lana had also done her fair share of dunking him under water for exactly such crimes, but he was too brave and too stupid

and too in love to not do it again, only to get her attention on him.

That was sort of a weird thought. Thinking about how he'd done the same to Lana, his first girlfriend, as he was now doing to Bruce. Was he always like this when he was in love with someone? No wonder Lois was sick of listening to him.

His moment of inattentiveness was a mistake. There were ways to defeat the Man of Steel, however few, and Bruce knew each and every one, probably. When Clark half-zoned out, he proceeded to dunk his head right under water and then gracefully swim away.

"Oh, it is on!" Clark crowed the moment he resurfaced, shaking his head like a wet dog and grinning hysterically.

"Come get me, Big Blue," Bruce called back, the smirk on his face challenging as he looked back over his shoulder at his friend. Clark felt a little bit like someone had used a kryptonite gauntlet to punch him in the gut, a little dizzy, a little woozy, and definitely a bit in love. Maybe that'd be where the kryptonite analogy ended.

The boys took a little nap alongside Damian before dinner, nearly entirely conked out from having run around and eaten and swam so much.

"They'll never settle for plain old playing in the manor again," Bruce sighed woefully to himself. Martha laughed, squeezing his shoulder.

"You're welcome any time. You sure know how to make an old lady happy."

"Not that old," Bruce argued, to which Martha scoffed, and swatted at him with the dish-towel.

"You look like you could use a little nap too, sweetheart," she said. Bruce waved her concern off, and instead helped fix dinner.

Martha's cooking was as always amazing, and afterwards, the boys were surprisingly energized again. The sun was no longer aggressively hot, but on it's way down, and they'd be going back to Gotham in a couple of hours. Bruce predicted the boys would drop off soon. There was only so much excitement they could take during a day.

For now though, Bruce leaned against the porch railing with some ice

tea, watching them play hopscotch in the dirtyard and wondering who'd get the little pebble tossed at them first.

"This is nice, right?" Clark said smugly, coming up and leaning against the railing of the porch next to him. He'd switched from his bad suit when they'd gone swimming, but now he was in a flannel and jeans, looking just like the Kansas hick he was supposed to be.

"Don't be smug. It doesn't suit you," Bruce said, rolling his eyes at his friend. Clark laughed, and in the setting sun, his skin glowed, and his smile was even more amplified than usual, making Bruce sip his iced tea to give his mouth something to do.

"All I'm saying is, I've been telling you this was a good idea since forever," he grinned, his tone teasing. "Maybe you should listen to me a little more."

"I listen to you," Bruce argued.

"Scarcely," Clark pointed out, leaning closer without either of them really noticing.

"Yes I do. Don't make yourself the martyr. Sometimes you make good judgment calls."

"Sometimes? Oh, I'm flattered." Bruce rolled his eyes at Clark's tone.

"Stop it," he droned.

"Oh, no, I'm just happy the great Batman thinks I have a good judgment. Sometimes," Clark went on, and finally Bruce just grunted in response.

"It must've been a nice place to grow up," he added after a moment.

"It is," Clark agreed. "I mean, I got to get up with the sun most of the days, but once I actually got out into the sun, it grew on me. I always feel like I'm doing something I shouldn't be whenever I sleep til ten." Bruce huffed in amusement.

"I've got to consider my options, I suppose."

"Options?" Clark asked. Bruce shrugged.

"Zatanna isn't answering." Clark's eyes widened. "Yeah. I've tried to contact other magical contacts, but they insist they're busy, so if she doesn't answer soon, I'll have to set the boys up and hunt her down."

"Well you know I'd love to volunteer to chaperone them."

"It's been made very clear, yes," Bruce said, and Clark chuckled a little, fiddling with his hands. "I... I appreciate it." Clark looked up at him from underneath his bangs, a sheepish smile on his face. There was less than a feet of air between their faces, their shoulders brushing.

"I know. You're a bit stubborn about showing it, but that's just you."

"Hmmm."

"Boys, would you give me a hand with the pitchers?" came Ma Kent's voice from where she'd slammed open the screen door, and Bruce hadn't even noticed how close they were standing until they were suddenly two yards apart.

"Of course, Martha," Bruce said, willing his voice to be smooth. "Boys, ice tea!"

It was around that time Kon came home from whatever Titans business he'd been on, so immediately Tim hopped up in his lap and wouldn't leave. The other three boys went back to playing as the sun set lower and lower.

Bruce went back to his sentry post by the porch railing, feeling the soft late-summer breeze on his exposed forearms. How had they ended up so close without him noticing? He was very observant, had forced himself to be. If he'd been paying more attention, he could've put the platonic space necessary between them. Stupid biological imperative. Stupid him for not noticing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce saw something out of the ordinary. This time, he forced himself to pay attention, and watched as the breeze tugged on the corn, making it sway gently. However, that wasn't what had caught his eye. Some of the stalks were swaying the other way.

That made him perk up as he stood a little taller, trying to see better out over the field.

"What's the matter, Bruce?" Clark asked, coming to stand next to him again.

"There's something in the corn," Bruce said, watching the separately swaying stalks moving closer to the edge of the field.

"I mean, the corn is very creepy, and it always feels like there's something there, but I doubt there's really anything dangerous. Maybe an animal or two," Clark said with a small smirk. "City boy noticing that you don't screw around in corn fields? Wow, that's-"

"Kal. Listen," Bruce said, eyes intent as he gazed at the corn. Clark's smirk turned into a frown, and he tilted his head to the left slightly.

"I don't hear anything weird?" he said skeptically, but Bruce saw the rustle, and whatever it was, it wasn't good. He saw Dick and Jason rolling around wrestling by the edge of the cornfield, Tim sitting on the porch swing with Ma and Kon.

"Jason, Dick, get out of the corn!" Bruce barked as he stepped off the porch, using the commanding, Batman-voice without really thinking about it, and both his Robins reacted, Dick leaping to his feet and running within a second, Jason rolling onto all fours to scramble to his feet and run for his life. Three out of four safe. The little swishes of corn kept creeping closer to the edge of the field. "Where's Damian?!" he shouted when they ran past him for the safety of the porch, and he saw the little boy standing in front of the corn. "Damian!"

Bruce watched in horror as slim fingers appeared to part the long, dried stalks, and then Talia's serene face followed. Damian reached his hands up towards her, and Bruce could see the glinting of her white teeth as she bared them in a smile.

"**Come on, my little prince, come to your mother**," he heard Talia croon as she picked Damian up, cradling him to her chest. Bruce's mind was disconnected from his body as it moved towards the two swiftly, his feet beating the ground without him noticing. He wasn't fast enough to reach them before the corn rustled, and Talia and Damian were swallowed by the huge field.

"Damian!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, but he couldn't hear anything, and then Clark was there, eyes wild.

"Bruce! Calm down, what's the matter?" he said, grasping Bruce's shoulder.

"Talia. Talia's here," he forced himself to grit out before he grabbed the back of Clark's neck and met his eyes fiercely. "Bring me up."

Without hesitation, Clark took a firmer grip around him, and brought them into the air above the cornfield. Bruce's eyes skimmed the field until he saw the corn move again, rustling all the way into what

looked like a crop circle.

"There- drop me," Bruce said, pushing away from Clark's torso.

"Are you crazy!? I'm coming with you," he said incredulously, getting a firmer grip on Bruce as he tried to slip out of his grip.

"No! If you care at all about me or my children, you will drop me by her and then take the kids inside and stay away until I have Damian safe. Talia is not stupid! She came *here*! Did you really think she wouldn't bring anything to subdue you?" Bruce growled, and Clark made a very sour face.

“You could use the back-“ he began, but Bruce didn’t have time for any of this, so he pushed away from Clark again, making the reporter curse under his breath before he silently and quickly let Bruce down close to the crop circle.

When Bruce stepped into the cleared little area, maybe three and a half yards in diameter, he found Talia and Damian sitting on the ground, Damian excitedly telling her everything about the chickens and horses and cows he'd seen today. She was stroking his cheeks, smiling at him happily, looking for all the world like a normal, patient mother. Bruce knew better than that.

"Talia," he said slowly, and Talia looked up at him, her dark hair falling over her shoulder. Damian was playing with it as he blabbered on, beaming up at his mother. He was securely cradled in her lap, covering her entire torso. An entirely intentional move on Talia's part, obviously.

"Beloved," she said with a smile. Damian turned too, looking up at his father, and not noticing the tense lines of his face.

"Baba!" he said happily, reaching one pudgy hand out for him. Bruce crouched down and held his own hand out, staring at Damian intently and begging his young, impressionable mind to remember something about what Talia had done to him later in life.

None of that recognition came.

"Ah ah ah," Talia clicked with her tongue, and Damian immediately refocused on her and her hair, looking happy and pleased.

"Whatever you want, this isn't the way to get it," Bruce said slowly, taking in all of the knives she had hidden on her body right now.

Damian was a toddler, he wanted to touch and chew on almost everything. A slip of her shirt's cleavage and Damian would hurt himself.

"Isn't a mother allowed to seek out her child? You've been so secretive. I never thought you'd leave your little cave," she murmured, tugging on Damian's shirt. It had tiny rainbows and stars all over it, because Dick wouldn't let Damian live in peace, no matter his age. "Did think you had better taste in clothing though."

"I did offer pictures," Bruce pointed out, forcing himself to unclench his jaw. Talia wanted civil conversation, Bruce didn't want Damian in the middle of whatever fight they were about to have. So, civil it was. He stayed crouched though, hoping for Damian to toddle over to him all on his own.

"It's not nearly the same. You've noticed that, haven't you, with… Richard?" she asked, twirling a tuft of Damian's dark, baby-soft hair. She hadn't looked away from Bruce once since he came into the clearing.

"Yes," Bruce admitted, because what purpose did lying have? Talia would still be sitting here with Damian, and Bruce would still be in this mess. He never should've left the manor in the first place. He never should've let Martha or Clark talk him into this.

"I just wanted to see him. He's a precious child, isn't he?" she said, in a suspiciously proud tone.

"He is," Bruce agreed. *No thanks to you* was left unsaid, but Bruce was pretty sure it shone through his eyes, because Talia petted Damian's hair again, almost like she was comforting herself.

"It is not tradition that the children of al Ghul be nursed by their parents," Talia said, like she was trying to make excuses. "I wasn't allowed to see him enough in the beginning. Only when he was old enough to talk, to fight. To learn."

Bruce was tired of whatever game she was trying to play, whether it be sympathy, emotional manipulation, or just messing with his head because she wanted to.

"Yes, and you always follow tradition, don't you, Talia?" Bruce said sharply. Talia's soft, plump mouth turned even softer, a little sad maybe.

"Don't you see, beloved?" she whispered, her green eyes glittering in the moonlight. "This is our chance to start over. To go back, make everything right from the start. Raise Damian together, like a real family. Never let him be conflicted again."

"And just erase the Damian we know now? Just because he didn't turn out like you wanted him to, and rejected the path you chose for him? He's a child, not a toy," Bruce retorted, entirely unbelieving. Sure, he knew Ra's had a very airy policy on starting over, but she was better than that. Was ready to pass the empire down to Damian, even, without using the pit. "I'm not going to let you use this to your advantage and erase your mistakes from existence, Talia. Especially not when that's our son."

"You forget I erase your mistakes for you, beloved, clean up your messes. I never did hear a thanks for that, by the way," Talia said lowly, eyes narrowed as her vibrating voice flowed through him.

"Raising Jason from the dead, is that supposed to be a favor to me? A help? He came back half out of his mind and wanted to kill me. You helped," Bruce said incredulously, and maybe slightly louder than he should have.

Damian, who had begun to look increasingly more worried as his look switched between his parents like one might watch a tennis match, let out a dissatisfied little whimper.

"**Don't worry, little prince, mama and baba are just talking**," Bruce hurried to say. The last thing they needed now was an out-of-control Damian. Bruce was still too worried about Talia's various weapons, and Talia was obviously still in the mood to talk. Bruce found he'd taken a step closer in a need to comfort, and Talia had noticed.

"**Baba's just getting a little too excited, heart of mine, he doesn't mean anything by it**," she promised, making little soothing circles on Damian's back with her fingertips. Damian gave them both worried looks, but Bruce smiled at him reassuringly, and Talia smoothed his hair back again. Damian went back to playing with his mother's hair, and Talia and Bruce locked eyes in their stalemate again.

"You like him more now than you do when he's older. I know, beloved. He's easier now," she said without prelude. "Just one more chance. We're being offered one by the universe. He'll prosper with us both there to hold him and guide him. We can be together again, Bruce."

She hadn't really said his name in a while, and Bruce felt that familiar tug at his heart at the soft, green look in her eyes. But she had bathed in too much blood to ever be clean again. She had no remorse, saw nothing wrong in her actions.

Bruce and Dick had worked so hard to get Damian out of that mentality, and he was only ten at the time. Talia was too set in her ways to ever break the pattern, could never admit that maybe Ra's hadn't the best motto. She could never let the legacy of the Demon’s Head go. Damian could at least focus on the legacy of Batman whenever he questioned his choices.

"We can never do that, Talia," Bruce sighed, shaking his head. "You know we don't go together. We don't agree on anything anymore, and we've continuously proved that we can't function in a relationship. I don't love you anymore." Talia looked him over, and then the green meadows in her eyes hardened into jade.

"Fine," she said, and pulled a knife out from her boot. "We'll do this the other way then. **We're going to play the lion game, heart of mine**."

"**Okay mama**," Damian said, and now the knife was pressed firmly against his son's little throat.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Talia," Bruce said again, but this time it was a shocked, angry growl. They were too far away for Bruce to physically get to them before Talia slit their son's throat. He'd never thought she was capable of this. She had picked Jason off the streets, cared for him like a son, she'd trained Damian personally from the day he could walk and talk coherently. Rather than kill him, as tradition called for, she disowned him. How could she ever kill him? "You don't want to do that."

"**Lion game. Count for me, Damian**," Talia said, firmly wrapping Damian's fist around the hilt of the knife. Damian began counting, and when Talia let go of his hand, he kept the knife there. She buried her nose in Damian's hair, kissed it without looking away from Bruce. "Ever played the lion game, beloved? It's a nice, quiet game."

"I can't believe you!" Bruce nearly roared as Talia got back on her feet, leaving Damian sitting in the dirt, still with a knife to his own throat.

“Goodbye, beloved,” Talia hummed at him, slowly walking backwards. “**Louder, sweetheart, I can barely hear you!**”

Damian counted louder, switching from Farsi to German, and Talia smiled sweetly at Bruce before disappearing into the darkness between the stalks, the last thing he saw being her sharp white teeth.

The moment she was out of sight, Bruce jumped into action, his heart beating hard in his chest.

"**Damian, drop the knife**," Bruce said immediately, dropping to his knees in front of his son. Damian gave him an odd look, and kept counting. Without really thinking it through, Bruce grasped the hilt of the knife and pulled it out of Damian's hands, tossing it behind them before gripping Damian's shoulders.

"**Don't ever play the lion game again, you hear me?**" Bruce said fiercely, and Damian's eyes began tearing up. "**Promise me!**"

"**I-I'm never going to p-play lion game again**," Damian said, his little

breath hitching, and then he was full out crying, but Bruce just cradled Damian tighter to his chest, making himself exhale.

"Jesus fucking- Okay," Bruce said to himself, allowing himself a moment of weakness before he stood up, walking out of the corn.

Once they were out in the open air again, Bruce contemplated getting right into the batplane and going back to Gotham, where it was safe, where Talia wouldn't dare come for him, but then Clark was in front of him, and Damian was reaching out towards him, sobbing. The look on Clark's face was shocked, but he took the toddler.

Of course, Bruce could do nothing right when it came to his kids.

"Bruce?" came Clark's worried voice, carrying over whatever fog Bruce's brain decided to cloud over with. It'd been a while since that had happened, and Bruce had sort of forgotten how to deal with it. He forced himself to take deeper breaths. That helped, right? He needed to center himself, and standing right in the middle of a Kansas farm did not help.

"She's gone," he managed to get out, because of course Clark would want information, but Clark didn't look relieved, he looked wide-eyed and worried when he bobbed a little on the spot to soothe Damian.

"Okay. Okay, uh, Bruce? Come sit with me," he said, grabbing Bruce's elbow gently and guiding him towards the porch, sitting him down on the porch-swing. "Stay right here."

Porch-swing was good. Bruce closed his eyes, blocking all thoughts of Talia out and instead focusing on making his breathing even and his heartbeat calm down. He thought about his kids and Titus, and Alfred, who was probably taking his night-cup of tea right about now, in the manor. He needed to get them home as soon as possible. He needed to call Cassandra. No, Stephanie.

He opened his eyes, and pulled his phone out of his pocket, dialing Stephanie's number. Luckily, she picked up in two rings.

"Sup' B! How's the farm?" came Stephanie's cheery voice, and Bruce exhaled.

"I need you to check the perimeter for me," was what came out of his mouth, and there was a moment of silence. He probably should have cushioned that a bit, but Stephanie was used to him.

"Uh. Alright. Why, what's going on?" she asked.

"Talia came to the farm," Bruce grit out, and Stephanie gasped. "Get into the cave and check."

"Shit, are you guys okay? She didn't make off with any of the little guys, did she?"

"No," Bruce said. Oh god, what if she had? She could have easily made off with Damian any second, without hesitation, if she was really dedicated to her plan-

"Well, the perimeter is unbreached here. Not a single alarm. You know we would've known if it was fiddled with," Steph said, breaking Bruce out of his thoughts, and he forced himself to take even breaths again.

"How's Cassandra doing?" he asked.

"Good, I think. She's been eating and we even made it to the library today," Steph announced proudly. "Alfie says she's getting better."

"Good. Arm yourself, bring Titus, and get out and do a walk," Bruce demanded. "Are you patrolling tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm meeting Arsenal at the clock-tower in a couple of hours," she replied, sounding skeptical. "Dude, if Talia was just in Kansas, I doubt she'll pop up here right now."

"Do it now," Bruce said, and utilized the commanding Batman tone. Stephanie made a put-upon sigh. "Bring anti-toxins out, and tell Arsenal to take his stun arrows with him. Fill Babs in."

"I think you're overreacting," Stephanie informed him. "But since it's you overreacting, you don't care about that."

"Call me back when you've done the round," he said, willfully ignoring that last part.

"Fine," Steph said, and hung up on him. At least he knew they were safe back home.

The screen door swung open, and Clark came out again, grabbing Bruce's shoulder.

"C'mon," he said, pulling Bruce onto his feet.

"I can walk on my own, Kal," Bruce snapped, and shook Clark's hand

off his shoulder.

"Yeah, well, I can't, so you're going to amuse me, right?" Clark said, his hand returning immediately to Bruce's shoulder. The billionaire grumbled as the reporter lead him over to the barn, pushing Bruce in. "Now, what happened?"

"Didn't you hear? What with your super-hearing and your constant need to listen in on me," Bruce shot off at him. Clark rolled his eyes as he closed the door behind him, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"No, I was busy calming down Dick, who was going to go out and physically fight Talia. With fists and feet. He's only thirteen. How does he already hate her so much?" he asked incredulously.

"They've had a few encounters by now," Bruce said, thinking back. Very few, but she'd largely ignored Dick during all of those times, and only ground him into the dirt when she thought he was getting too cocky. Which, with Talia, was a pretty low bar. Surprising that she hadn't tried to beat down on Dick more often. "None very good."

"Tell me about it. The moment he found out it was Talia that was out there, he climbed me like a tree trying to get out there and back you up."

"What about the others?"

"Jason just went quiet. And Tim was still sort of clinging to Kon," Clark frowned. "They didn't seem too inclined to go out, at least, which was good, since Dick is... Very slippery."

"And yet he's the Hostage Wonder," Bruce said, and could practically hear Babs saying it in her teasing tone. That was good. His brain wasn't trying to shut down. He was just upset about Talia and Damian. That was alright. He could compress and compartmentalize that. Wouldn't be the first time Talia forced him to do that.

"Tell me what happened," Clark repeated, and Bruce reluctantly gave him a short run-through of the events in the cornfield. Clark looked properly horrified at the mention of Damian anywhere near a knife, and even more horrified at the prospect of him holding it right to his throat, all on his own.

"He's not even upset at all about the knife game, just about me yelling at him. And that," Bruce finally concluded as he walked over to the side, taking a deep breath before promptly punching a hole in the

barn-wall. Clark jumped.

"Oh my god, Bruce!" he exclaimed, speeding over and pulling Bruce's arm out of the hole carefully, eyes wide. That had been an uncontrolled outburst, and Bruce hated that Clark was there to see it, that his iron control was slipping. "Jesus!"

"Sorry. I'll pay for it," Bruce muttered, and Clark inspected his now bloody knuckles.

"Look, you can't change what's already happened," Clark said, leading Bruce over to a hay bale and pushing him down to sit on it. "Talia did awful things to Damian when he was growing up, and you can't do anything about that."

"She taught him a game where he kept a knife to his throat," Bruce growled. "He's two. Since he knows it now, de-aged, it means she taught him that before he was two. Two years old and Talia is teaching him to hold a knife to his own throat so she can make an escape."

"I really doubt she brought Damian with her to meet up with people. I mean, you didn't even know Damian existed until he was, what, ten? She kept him well hidden," Clark pointed out. "She probably just used whatever she'd taught him now to conveniently make an escape."

"Why are you defending her?" Bruce asked incredulously.

"I'm not! Believe me, I'm not," Clark hurried to say. "You know I can't stand her. I'm just saying that you can't do anything about what she did to Damian."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?" Bruce asked, his anger rising again. "That I can't help my son?"

"Who says you can't help? You can still help. You just can't go back in time and kidnap him," Clark said soothingly. At the squinty look on Bruce's face, Clark held a hand up. "We're not going to go back in time to kidnap Damian, Bruce."

"I wasn't considering it," Bruce said.

"You were, I saw it in your eyes," Clark accused.

"Do you know how exhausting it is to raise small children? I wouldn't do that to Alfred or myself again," Bruce complained. "I just need all of

them back to normal, so that Damian can be reasoned with again. At least be easier to reason with."

"Yes, I know how exhausting it is to raise small children, we've been doing it for the past two weeks, B," Clark bickered, and Bruce sighed. "I can try listening for Zatanna, but she might be in another dimension, so I don't know if-"

"Speaking of listening for someone, how did you not hear her heartbeat?" Bruce interrupted, and Clark gave him a shocked look. "I suspect Talia had more than five men with her, too. You didn't hear any of that?"

The reporter gaped like a fish for a moment, and then his cheeks flushed.

"I'm sorry, I... Didn't listen good enough," he said slowly. Really, he'd been sort of focusing on the smell of Bruce's shampoo and the sound of his voice in combination with the swaying of the corn, and he hadn't paid enough attention to notice that what he thought was some animal was actually Talia.

"Didn't listen good enough?" Bruce repeated skeptically. Clark swallowed hard and shrugged.

"She's very quiet and I was distracted."

"By what?" Bruce demanded, and Clark fumbled for something to say that wouldn't sound idiotic and like he was in love with his best friend.

"Look, I'm sorry, alright? I screwed up. Luckily, we all got out alive, and well. Okay? Are you calmed down enough now that you won't freak out if Dick jumps on you?"

"That's why you brought me out here?" Bruce questioned.

"Yes, and you obviously needed the cool-down time. Look at the hole, B," Clark said incredulously, motioning with one hand towards the hole in the wall.

"I said I'd pay for it," Bruce pointed out, and Clark sighed.

"I know, I know, you did. It's fine. I'm just glad you got it out of your system here," he declared. "Let's go inside and reassure the kids, alright? And get you some bandaids for your hand."

"It's fine, I've had worse," Bruce protested, but he let Clark guide him back to the little farmhouse.

The moment they were through the screen door, all of his children attached themselves to his legs and his torso, except for Damian, who looked perfectly content in Ma Kent's arms. Ma Kent, however, looked concerned, and bounced Damian distantly on her hip.

Immediately the boys began yelling at him about no back-up, which was sweet, and Tim punched him in the leg, which wasn't as sweet, until Bruce held a hand up. They silenced, however reluctantly, and it was obviously very reluctantly. Jason kept opening his mouth and then closing it again with an audible snap, and Tim was tapping his foot impatiently on the floor.

"We've had the conversation about you being too small and untrained before, boys. This still applies," Bruce said calmly, and immediately there were cries of outrage and waving hands. Bruce blocked Tim's little fist from punching him in the leg again. "The fact that Talia went after Damian, who is youngest and most vulnerable, that doesn't make you realize I was right, all along?"

"Bullshit!" Jason cried out, and Bruce pinned him with a reproachful stare.

"Jason," Ma Kent said, her tone chastising, and Jason's shoulders flew up around his ears.

"Sorry, Ma," he muttered.

"Hey, boys, come into the kitchen and yell at Bruce there instead, okay? I gotta fix him up," Clark said, laying a hand on Dick's shoulder reassuringly. All of them frowned, but then Tim stomped his foot.

"March," he told Bruce, and Bruce scoffed as Kon burst out laughing from the living room.

"Tim, I love you," he said, and Tim shushed him and pointed very sternly towards the kitchen. Bruce shook his head in amusement at little Tim, and walked obediently into the kitchen.

"Did you get hurt from punching Talia?" Dick asked excitedly.

"No," Bruce said as he sat down and Clark disappeared into the bathroom.

"Oh. Well, can we go find her and punch her really hard in the face then?" Dick asked fiercely. Bruce sighed, and pulled his thirteen-year-old into his lap with his uninjured arm. He seemed the most likely to try and escape and run after her. Tim was a close second. Jason stood at the end of the table with his arms crossed, glowering, but not looking very prone to go after her.

"No."

"Why not? We're Batman and Robin!" Tim said, just as fierce as he climbed onto a chair next to them. Oh, yeah, Tim was flight-risk number two for sure. Kon was now leaning against the doorframe leading to the kitchen, which was good, he'd catch Tim if he tried to escape.

"Because she's already far away from here."

"I vote we go after her," Dick said, sounding surprisingly blood-thirsty. Bruce had sort of forgotten how possessive young Dick was of him.

"No," Bruce said, just as Tim agreed heartily, and Jason nodded a little grimly.

"Nobody's going after Talia, except maybe me," Clark declared as he reappeared with a battered metal box with a little plus on it. He put Tim in his lap rather than try to move him, and put the box down on the kitchen table.

"Well, apparently you can't hear well anymore, so I doubt that's a good idea," Bruce said without hesitation, and Clark pursed his lips as he brought out the anti-septic out of the little box.

"Oh, he hears good, alright, except when I ask 'm to unload the dishwasher," Ma scoffed, sitting down across from Clark and bouncing Damian a little on her lap. She gave Clark a very pointed look, raised eyebrows and a purse of her lips, which made Kon snicker. The boys snickered too, but not at Ma's look, rather her words.

Just then, Bruce's phone began ringing. He pulled it out of his pocket and found Barbara's name as the caller ID. Dick wiggled in his lap without really noticing, and Bruce internally smiled. There was something that would probably never change.

"Barbara. What's the matter?" he answered.

"Talia was in Kansas?" she said skeptically, getting right to the point.

God, could Bruce appreciate Barbara Gordon sometimes. "Did she take anyone?"

"No, just threatened to hurt. Has Steph done the rounds?"

"Yeah, as she said, nobody's triggered any alarms around the manor grounds, or the cave. They're still safe. ETA?"

"We'll get in the jet as soon as possible," Bruce decided, and was immediately met by a chorus of 'no's. "Yes, we will."

"**At least let them recover a little before you whisk them off to Gotham again**," Clark said, switching to Kryptonian, as he plastered some band-aids onto Bruce's knuckles. His hands were very warm, which Bruce noticed fleetingly as his hand was gently squeezed before being let go.

"**The faster we get back home, the faster the boys are safe, the faster your mother is safe, the faster we can all relax a little**," Bruce replied without hesitation in Kryptonian.

"Not fair," Dick complained, and pulled Bruce's phone out of his hands, pressing it to his ear. "Babs, tell Bruce to stop being an ass and let us stay longer!"

Whatever response he recieved was probably negative, because he pouted a bit.

"**I think you should at least stay long enough to gather your wits, and then you can go, when you're no longer rattled enough to want to punch walls**," Clark said pointedly. This, this was why Bruce *hated* slipping in front of other people. They held it against you.

"No, we're going because I say we are," Bruce said, switching back to English and meeting Clark's eyes fiercely.

"I can't let you do that, Bruce," Martha said gently, and Bruce looked over at her, only to see Damian quickly looking away. "No guest of mine gets to rush out in a hurry like that. She's not coming back now. There's no need to worry."

"We don't know that."

"I hope she comes back so I can kick her butt!" Dick said, nearly springing out of Bruce's lap with just how strongly he felt about that. Barbara said something on the other side of the call, and immediately,

Dick settled back against Bruce's chest again. "Uh huh. She wants to talk to you." He handed the phone back over just as Clark slammed the first-aid kit closed again.

"B? Alfred says he believes the kids would benefit from being calmed down and stuff before you force them to leave. Children's psychology. You might not need to come down before you make an escape plan, but they do. Calm them down before you stuff them in the jet," she said firmly.

"Hmmm," Bruce grunted, not entirely pleased with that.

"If Talia *does* come back, which we all doubt, actually use Clark, maybe? And Kon? When you have two supers, you make them useful, especially when she doesn't have any hostages. No, scratch that, when she *does* have hostages, that's when you use them too," she said sharply. "Putting Damian in danger because of a pissing contest-"

"That's not what it was. You don't know her like I do," Bruce said just as sharply and silently. Luckily, Clark was talking Jason and Tim down from a woman-hunt, so the conversation had shifted away from him, and nobody was listening to him.

"No, I don't. What I do know is that Talia wouldn't hesitate to hurt Damian if push came to shove, and that's why you should've told Clark to grab him before interacting. I think you froze and wouldn't take any of Clark's undoubtedly offered help."

Bruce didn't reply, only narrowing his eyes, and obviously the silence spoke loud enough for Babs, who sighed.

"Listen to Alfred about the kids. Wait a little before you stuff them in a small confined space and shake them," she advised. "I'm going out now. See ya."

There was the tell-tale click of her hanging up, and Bruce put his phone down on the table. Alfred was... Very usually right. He was the one who'd first made all the assessments about Cassandra's state of mind when they'd first began interacting. Bruce trusted Alfred, and hence, he followed his advice.

After a bit of cajoling, he managed to get the boys into the couch and watching some cartoons. Tim was holding Kon's hand, and Kon was smiling, barely glancing at the TV. Jason kept kicking Dick, but soon enough, the room was silent and calm, and Bruce came back into the kitchen where Ma and Clark were talking.

Damian was sitting in Ma's lap, drawing, but he looked tired, and he kept yawning. Bruce reached out for him, but Damian didn't look up, much less move to be picked up, his lips twisting into a pout as he used a red crayon to draw a very long, very hard line on his paper.

Bruce blinked. Right. He hadn't yelled at young Damian before.

"**C'mon little prince. Let's get you into your pjs**," Bruce suggested in Farsi, trying for a cajoling tone. Damian didn't react, and Clark looked up at Bruce with a frown.

"Damian?" Clark said softly, and Damian looked up at Clark. "**Time for pajamas**."

"**M'kay**," Damian said, and Bruce reached for him again, but this time Damian actually moved away from him. That... Actually hurt a little. But, okay, he was a toddler. His reasoning was Bruce had yelled at him, so now he didn't like Bruce anymore. Ma shifted Damian a little, stroking his forehead.

"Don't worry, toddlers are like this," she reassured Bruce. "Damian, sweetheart, your drawing looks really good." Damian made happy humming noises at that, and Ma chuckled a little. Bruce sat down on the chair next to her, and looked over at Damian, in all his chubby glory, drawing very determinately. What it was, Bruce wasn't exactly sure, but it seemed to have been deemed Very Important to Damian.

After a while of watching, he caught Damian trying to sneak a look at him, before promptly looking away again, his little nose tipping up. Bruce scoffed to himself.

"**I'm sorry I yelled at you, Damian. Okay? Baba was just... Scared**," he promised slowly. Little Damian still wouldn't look at him, choosing instead to keep drawing. "**I'm sorry if I scared you.**"

It took a while, but then Damian's nose tipped further up.

"**Not scared**," he announced.

"**Of course not**," Bruce agreed. Calling out a toddler on their lies was just silly. "**Now. Pajamas?**"

"**Okay**," Damian said, reaching his hands up, and Bruce picked him up, feeling the knot tied around his heart lighten it's grip a little when Damian's little head immediately fell on his shoulder. He could feel how tired Damian was from the slump of his body, and he brushed a

kiss against his forehead, taking a deep reassuring breath.

Talia hadn't gotten him. Thank God for that. Bruce took the stairs up to the second floor and Clark's old room, where he'd stashed the duffle, and Clark turned to watch them disappear. Once the two were out of sight, he turned back around in his chair to face his mother, only to see her knowing look. He immediately felt his ears heat up.

"So," she said casually, reaching a hand out over the table-top. Clark took it without thinking, grasping his mother's hand gently. "What were you really listenin' to when that witch came skulkin' through our cornfields?"

"Bruce," Clark admitted. His mother hummed.

"Uh-huh. Thought so," she said, squeezing his hand. "Don't worry, sweetheart. It'll come around."

"What will?" Clark asked a little miserably.

"The two of you, of course. I know it," she said firmly. "I have eyes, Clark honey. And I feel it in my bones."

"Really? Could your bones give me a time frame?" Clark said skeptically, and his mother smiled at him and patted his hand before standing up, heading for the fridge.

"All in it's own time, Clark. Hot cocoa?"

"Yes please," he sighed, and propped his arm against the table, resting his chin against his palm.

'It's own time' needed to happen faster.

When the boys were almost all the way passed out, Bruce forced them into pj's and made them brush their teeth, before wrapping them up in blankets and stuffing them into Clark's truck. Before they left, however, Ma Kent was given three sleepy hugs, and kissed Damian's little cheek, where it was smushed against Bruce's shoulder. Kon got a kiss on the cheek from a very sleepy Tim, and looked like that was the best thing to happen to him today.

Clark drove them to the batplane, and helped tuck the boys into their seats. Bruce kept a careful eye on their surroundings, and an ear on

the trees nearby. Call him overly paranoid, he wasn't taking any chances. Finally, everyone was buckled in except Bruce, who was still holding onto Damian.

"I've just got to help Ma with some late-night chores, and then I'll be with you, okay?" Clark said, a worried look in his eyes. Hidden by the glasses. Bruce pulled them off the bridge of his nose and tucked them into his pants pocket again and Clark was too used to it now to startle.

"Alright," Bruce replied quietly, instead of saying something snappy about Clark not staying in his own apartment. He would actually feel... Reassured having Clark there. Of course, he'd feel reassured the moment he entered the cave again.

"Promise me you'll at least try to sleep?" Clark pleaded, and Bruce frowned.

"I'm not tired, and someone needs to keep watch," he said.

"You didn't sleep last night," Clark reminded him. "It's been a nerve-wracking day. Please at least try. I'm begging you here, B." Bruce pursed his lips in response.

"We'll see," he acknowledged, and Clark sighed loudly.

"If you're not asleep by the time I get there, you're in trouble," he teased.

"Who are you, my butler?" Bruce bantered, and Clark put his hands on his hips, affronted.

"If that's what gets you to bed, yeah, sure. Go, I'll see you later," the reporter promised. Bruce hummed, and got into the plane, strapping Damian and himself in before taking off. Clark watched the jet disappear into the sky, and scratched the back of his neck tiredly, before making his way back to the farm.

Once back at the manor, Bruce tucked the boys into his bed with Alfred's help. He didn't bother putting them in their own beds. He'd prefer keeping them close tonight, just for safety's sake. About half an hour after they'd gotten home, there was shuffling out in the hallway, and Cassandra entered the room, leaning against the doorway.

"How are you feeling?" Bruce asked as he hurried over to support her. Cassandra yawned, and took his offered arm, leaning heavily against

his side. She didn't look as pale as she had when he left her this morning. There was a huge difference between weak and tired, and thankfully, she looked more tired than weak.

"Better," she murmured, drawing a circle on the back of his hand with a fingertip. Circle meant happy, calm, good.

"Good. Want to stay with the boys and me?" he asked her knowingly, and Cassandra nodded sleepily.

Bruce kissed the top of her head, guiding her towards the bed like he'd just done to the rest of his kids, tucking her in between Tim and Jason. Luckily, Bruce's bed was a Cal King, and with Damian rolled up in his little co-sleeper, there was enough space that they would all be able to fit comfortably. Bruce stood and watched all of their relaxed, sleepy faces for a moment, crossing his arms over his chest.

There was the sound of claws clicking against wooden floors, and Titus nudged the door open, stopping by Bruce and headbutting his thigh to get his head petted.

"You want in, too, don't you?" Bruce said to the Great Dane, who huffed and hopped up onto the bed, taking that as an invitation. "Of course you do."

There was a knock on the door, and Alfred peeked in. Bruce nodded at him as Alfred stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"I think it's beginning to get a little crowded in here," the billionaire stated, and Alfred flicked an eyebrow as he glanced at the bed.

"Oh my. It looks like you are all having quite the party in here, Master Bruce," he said in that slightly-amused-Alfred way. Bruce huffed.

"Very much so." There was a pause as they both looked to the residents of the bed. Cassandra had curled around Tim and Dick had a hand in Jason's hair and the other one extended towards Damian. Bruce wondered how the hell he was supposed to get in his own bed.

"I heard Miss al Ghul made an appearance, sir," Alfred said silently into the dimness of the room, and Bruce took a deep breath.

"She did."

"And held a knife to Master Damian's throat."

"She did," Bruce said, and his voice was entirely level. The image flashed in his mind again, and Bruce promptly shoved it into the box aptly named "reasons to stay away from Talia".

"I gather Master Damian was quite upset."

"Not until I yelled about it." He could tell Alfred's greying eyebrows had raised at that.

"Ah. Shall I be expecting Master Clark to fly in soon?"

"Yes," Bruce admitted reluctantly. "I'll be in the cave. Have Batgirl and Spoiler reported anything in yet?"

"Miss Stephanie stopped a robbery of the Gotham City Bank, and Mister Harper is taking the Crime Alley route tonight. Miss Barbara is currently... Convincing a man to hand over the information that she needs," he said as they stepped out, Bruce snagging the baby monitor before he closed the door behind them.

"No sightings of Talia?" he questioned.

"No, Master Bruce. I doubt she'll make an appearance so soon," Alfred said as they walked together to the study.

"Doesn't mean we should drop our guard," Bruce said firmly, and Alfred sighed silently.

"As you wish, Master Bruce," he said long-sufferingly.

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovelies!!! Thank you so much for your continuing support, I promise we're about to get a solution to everything!!! Soon!! Have more cuteness while we're at it.
I've had major issues trying to post this chapter because the archive wouldn't let me post anything!! I've been talking to support about it, but they take a while to reply and stuff.
Also, I don't have children of my own, but I was one of those children who ran off without supervision or told anyone where I was going a lot, so I've had my fair share of dad-yelling-at-me-because-he's-scared-I-got-kidnapped-or-something yelling in my

life. Parents aren't perfect, and if your child has a knife to their throat, you're probably gonna yell and get scared! It happens! Someone's probably gonna cry about it, but it happens.
No, but honestly, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, it really fuels my need to write, so pls feed me! Love all of you <3<3

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce did get a couple of hours of sleep, only when surrounded on all sides by his children and the dog and their breathing, getting up regularly to check the monitors and the grounds. However, when Clark checked in on them in the morning, the majority of the children had gathered around Bruce like heat-seeking little missiles.

Clark went to work on Wednesday, day fifteen, whilst Bruce went around checking the defenses on the manor almost every hour. The day was rainy but still warm, which meant the boys longingly stared outside, but didn't say a peep about it. They'd been pretty shaken by last night's events, and probably wouldn't nag him for at least a few days about it.

The fact that they'd been scared for him and Damian only came out when first Jason very quietly told Bruce he'd kick Talia's ass to protect him after breakfast in the library, and then when Tim spilled juice all over himself to make Bruce wash him up and then confessed that if Dick had lead the charge, he would have undoubtedly gone after Talia with a Kent-farm pitchfork. Dick utilized a very vicious drawing to show him exactly what he'd do to Talia if only Bruce would have let him. Not a single one of them seemed convinced he could handle Talia on his own.

Mostly during the morning, the lot of them played in Cass' room, watching movies and playing a very heated version of Monopoly, since Jason kept insisting Tim was cheating, to which Tim replied "I just make sounder investments than you".

Roy had other engagements for the day, which obviously bummed Jason out too. When he wasn't going around the grounds, checking the perimeter, or the alarms, Bruce checked in on his affairs, and did some League business with Damian sitting in his lap, much to Diana's amusement.

"Those two would do well paired up, the combination of aerial and range and- Diana, are you even listening to me?" Bruce accused,

annoyed. Diana's eyes snapped back to his guiltily.

"I'm sorry B, he's just so cute," she beamed as Damian made another line on the paper with his crayons. His concentrated pout was probably what Diana was referring to, and yes, it was a precious look, but Bruce needed her to concentrate. "How about we talk about this in person? I'll come over for lunch."

"You don't have to, if you listen now," Bruce pointed out. Diana, however, was obviously no longer listening to him, a grin on her face as Damian looked over at his crayons very seriously, debating which one to pick.

"Great! I'll see you in an hour," she said, and promptly hung up their video call in his face. Bruce sighed to himself, but stood up, taking Damian with him.

Immediately, his toddler screamed angrily, and Bruce hurried to soothe.

"**We'll be back soon, I promise**," Bruce said quickly, picking up a green ball off the floor to distract him. Damian threw the ball across the room and yelled 'no' at the top of his lungs. Immediately, Titus sprang forward from where he'd been hiding behind the desk, and Bruce put Damian down on the floor, where he got licked in the face by Titus. Instantly the little boy quieted down, and giggled at the dog. "C'mon Titus."

Titus got up, and Damian got himself on his feet, laughing as he chased after the amused Titus. Bruce lead them to the stairs, grabbing Damian before he followed Titus down.

"Alfred!" he called, and Alfred poked his head out of the kitchen just as Titus disappeared into it. "Diana invited herself over for lunch."

"Awesome!" came Jason's yell from behind him, and there was the whirr of Tim's electric car. When Bruce turned around, the car came around a corner, and showed Tim behind the wheel, Cassandra crammed into the passengers seat with Jason sitting on the hood of the car.

"Where's Dick?" Bruce asked suspiciously and held a hand out to Cassandra. She made the sign for "Fine" in ASL, and Bruce nodded and realigned Damian on his hip instead. The toddler was making little whiny noises, and Bruce sighed. "Titus!"

"Dick got stuck in a chandelier," Tim relayed as Titus dashed right back up the stairs, his tail wagging as he licked at Damian's socks. Damian was back to being all smiles again.

"What? How long has he been stuck?" Bruce asked incredulously.

"Half an hour maybe?" Jason said distantly, looking at an imaginary watch.

"We had to find the car before we found you, and then Cassandra said she wanted a ride, so we picked her up, and then we came to find you!" Tim justified, honking the horn to make a point. Bruce internally sighed, and plopped Damian down in Cassandra's lap.

"Watch him for a moment. And don't you dare go down the stairs. We all know what happens, *right*?" he said pointedly, and Jason and Tim nodded gravelly. "Good. What room?"

"Upper left right sitting room," Jason said.

"That sitting room doesn't have a chandelier," Bruce said. Jason frowned.

"Then it's the upper left right right sitting room," he declared, and Bruce sighed.

"I'll find him," he said instead, and took off down the hallway.

Once he finally found Dick, in the upper right left left sitting room, he nearly laughed. Dick was indeed stuck on top of a chandelier, but not exactly like Bruce had pictured, stuck with a foot and dangling upside down. No, Dick was fine, curled around the thick golden chain connecting the chandelier to the ceiling and looking bored.

He lit up when he saw Bruce in the doorway.

"Bruce!" he said cheerily, giving him a jaunty salute. "How ya doing."

"How did you get stuck?" Bruce asked incredulously. Dick loved the chandeliers, always had, and once he found out they were structurally sound enough to carry his weight, he was barely on the ground for a month. Dick was a Flying Grayson, after all, and jumping between rooftops was only so much like a trapeze.

"The painting slipped," Dick said sheepishly, motioning for the large painting that was now on the floor. Hopefully nothing too expensive,

or Bruce would be a victim of Alfred's gaze of doom.

"Need a spotter?" Bruce offered with a pointed eyebrow raise, and Dick groaned.

"Fine! I hear what you're saying! I shouldn't be on anything without you nearby!" Dick exclaimed dramatically, and tossed his head back like whatever Bruce was saying was exhausting him.

"I'm glad you've come to your senses, chum," Bruce said with a smile, and stood slightly to the left of underneath the chandelier. "Jump. I've got you."

"What about your ribs?" Dick asked. Oh, they would *not* like catching Dick, but Bruce didn't really mind.

"They're fine. I'll catch you," Bruce promised.

"But your arm!" Dick said pointedly. The stitches in his arm from Jason's swipe of the sword during that first night two weeks ago itched when Dick pointed it out, but they were nearly healed now, it was fine. He'd be fine.

"Dick," he said firmly, and Dick stood up on top of the chandelier, setting the little crystals clinking as they bumped into each other.

"If you get even more injured, you're taking the chew-out from Alfred," Dick said very firmly, pointing a stern finger at him. Bruce huffed.

"Sure. *Jump*," he said firmly. Dick did a little skip off the chandelier, falling practically straight into Bruce's arms, and yeah, he felt a sort of dull, stabbing pain in his ribs when he caught Dick's full weight. Wasn't bad enough for him to make a noise, at least. And now he was holding thirteen-year-old Dick like he was nine again. Dick grinned at him.

"Think you could carry me like this when I'm older?" Dick asked.

"You're technically too old for this right now either way," Bruce said, and set Dick down on the floor. Dick pouted a little, before glancing back at the painting.

"You don't think Alfie will notice, do ya?" he asked a little hopefully, and Bruce raised an eyebrow. Dick sighed. "Yeah. You're right. He probably already knows."

"I left your siblings by the kitchen. There's no way he doesn't know," Bruce said, leading Dick out of the sitting room. "Diana will be joining us for lunch."

"Awesome!" Dick said happily, rolling fluidly into a cartwheel, and then back up on his feet, running towards the kitchen. There was a trick of light behind him, and Bruce immediately turned, his senses on high alert. Nothing there. Just shadows. But shadows hid things. Bruce knew that well enough, he practically lived in the shadows.

Without hesitation, he rushed down to the cave to check the alarms, and, when he found nothing, he geared up to take a walk outside.

"B?" came Jason's call from upstairs, and Bruce grabbed a few batarangs and a few electrifying discs before dashing up the stairs again.

"Stay away from the windows," Bruce barked as he walked by Jason out of the study. "I'll be back."

"Hey wait!" Jason shouted after him as he stepped out into the garden, but Bruce turned around, holding up a finger in the universal gesture of 'wait'. Jason stopped just short of stepping over the threshold.

"Inside. Away from windows," Bruce demanded, and Jason frowned, but disappeared back inside.

What had been full-blown rain earlier that morning had turned into a misty drizzle, with the occasional raindrop, and Bruce was only in a Gotham Knights shirt with a hoodie over, along with slacks. The warm mist immediately stuck to his exposed skin in an uncomfortable way, but Bruce was more interested in the edges of his property. He walked, eyes flitting to the little forest at the end of the property, over to the poolhouse, the fence.

Suddenly, Bruce felt a presence behind him, and tossed a batarang without thinking, without looking, and there was the ding of metal hitting metal. He turned around, ready for the threat, only to find Diana in full Wonder Woman gear, with a bag slung over her shoulder and a bracelet up to block the projectile. Her look of shock would have been very amusing, had Bruce not been frazzled as all hell right now.

"Is this how you greet all of your guests now?" she asked incredulously, picking the batarang up out of the grass.

"Diana," he exhaled.

"Yes. What is the meaning of this?"

"I thought you were someone else," he said instead of an apology, and she frowned.

"Who?" she inquired. When Bruce just stared at her, she snapped his batarang in half, obviously for the sake of being petty. "Fine. Would you like assistance?"

"What?" he said in surprise.

"You're checking the perimeter. Two pairs of eyes are better than one," she explained patiently, a little condescening, but he'd sort of expected that. He hadn't expected the offer of help, but he should have. Diana was caring. He really was a little frazzled.

"Yes, I could use the aerial support," Bruce said, a little stunned. Diana nodded, and flew off the ground a few feet.

"What am I looking for?" she demanded.

"Anything that moves and is human and not paparazzi," he said firmly, and she nodded before disappearing up into the rainy sky.

Sometimes he wondered why he wasn't in love with Diana. She was fire, a much bigger threat than people thought at first glance, and had kicked his ass a lot. He should be more attracted to her than he was. Mostly, he just saw her as a sister in arms. She would spend time with him, and go to boring art exhibits with him, and she could make him laugh. Yet, there was something stopping him. Bruce still hadn't figured out what it was.

Finally, after about an hour, he could safely say that there was no one on the manor grounds who shouldn't be there, and he invited Diana inside.

"Diana!" Jason exclaimed happily the moment they stepped in through the veranda doors, and dashed forward. Diana grinned, going down on one knee to greet him. The moment he was close enough, they fist-bumped, and then Diana held her left arm up in her typical protective pose, and Jason slammed his right arm up against hers in the same position. A handshake. Sort of cute, and also sort of shocking, since Diana had shot Jason full of foam darts last time she was here. Evidently, Jason didn't hold that against her.

"Jason. How are you feeling?" she asked, straightening up to her full height again.

"Alfred hid the nerf-darts," he said a little sadly, and Diana seemed a little disappointed at that.

"Oh. I see. But what's the point of being the son of the world's greatest detective if he can't find your darts for you?" she smirked, turning to Bruce. Jason looked at his father figure expectantly, and Bruce frowned.

"What did you do that made Alfred take the darts away?" he asked, because Alfred rarely did things without a reason. Jason kicked the carpet.

"Why you always gotta assume I've done something?" Jason whined, and Bruce raised an eyebrow at him incredulously.

"Previous experience."

"Master Jason tossed Master Damian's stuffed bat down the stairs, which Master Damian did not know wasn't fatal for the poor animal, Sir," Alfred said as he appeared in the doorway. "Miss Prince. How lovely for you to visit. However, no super-get-ups in the manor."

"Yes, of course, I'll go change," she snickered.

"Nice try though," Bruce said to the caught Jason, and Diana laughed loudly as she walked off to the nearest bathroom, making Bruce instinctively shift away from her. That was definitely one of the reasons he wasn't in love with Diana. Not that she was loud, but that she was so volatile. She had her morals, and stuck to them, but she also broke her pattern more often than Bruce was comfortable with.

Jason pouted, and Bruce sighed deeply.

"He was being a prissy brat about his little stuffed toy, alright! Geeze," Jason huffed, and stomped out of the room.

"Lunch is in twenty minutes, Master Jason," Alfred reminded the boy, and Jason waved him off, stomping up the stairs.

"Do I have to deal with him?" Bruce inquired, and Alfred's lips pursed just the slightest.

"I believe Master Jason's outburst is a result of stress and worry,

actually, Master Bruce. May I suggest that you decrease the frequency of how often you go outside to check the perimeters? You built machines to do that for you," Alfred reminded him.

"Talia's too good. She'd bypass them without the cameras noticing if she really wanted to," Bruce said, dragging a hand through his damp hair. "I'm doing it to keep them safe and reduce the stress and worry."

"It's doing the opposite, Sir."

"So what, you want me to just let it go?" Bruce scoffed incredulously. "Talia threatened their safety. I'm just keeping them safe."

"And snapping at them as you do so. The only reason the children are scared and worried are because you are outrageously overreacting, sir," Alfred said calmly.

"She had a knife to his throat, Alfred!" Bruce hissed.

"No, Master Damian himself held a knife to his throat because Miss al Ghul taught him a game where that is in the rules. To him, they were playing a game, which you interrupted rather bruthishly to yell at him. Presumably, she had no intentions to harm him, but only to upset you, and distract you. Master Damian was only upset because you frightened him when you shouted at him, and the other boys only do the same because you seem ready to climb the walls. That is not what they need right now, Master Bruce. The rest are in the library right now. Take a moment to sit with them and tell them they have nothing to worry about."

"I would be lying."

"Then lie, Master Bruce," Alfred said without hesitation. "Take a defensive stance instead of an offensive one, for once." When that left Bruce silent, Alfred inclined his head slightly in a nod. "Twenty minutes to lunch, Sir."

Then the butler disappeared the same way he came.

After lunch, Damian was put down for his nap, and the rest of them moved down to the batcave. Bruce felt good about being able to glance over at the screens at any moment, and now Diana was on child-catching duty, even though she just sat on top of his computer panel and discussed Justice League things with him. She was fast.

She'd catch them if it was necessary.

Earlier, Cassandra hadn't passed out so much as had a severe dizzy spell, but it was enough for Bruce to send her straight back to the infirmary in the cave, where Alfred was currently running some tests on her, just to make sure all the poison was really out of her body, or at least getting there.

It took a while before the boys got a little bored in their jungle gym, and Tim was hanging upside down from a beam, his skirt flopping down over his stomach, when he piped up.

"Hey, Diana, do you think you could beat up Bruce?" he asked curiously, in that childishly curious way of his he'd recently adapted. Diana and Bruce met eyes, and she quirked an eyebrow.

"I know so," she told them. All three pairs of eyes widened at her.

"No way! You beat Batman?" Jason crowed. "That's amazing."

"Wow," Dick said, looking a little starstruck.

"Cool," Tim decided fairly.

"Why are none of you ever on my side?" Bruce asked them incredulously. You'd think he hadn't taken them all in, clothed them, fed them, and trained them at all.

"She's Wonder Woman, what do you want us to say?" Jason said, looking at him in the adults-are-dumb way they all absolutely loved to do.

"I could beat you," Bruce said, turning to Diana.

"Past experiences say otherwise," Diana pointed out sweetly.

"Because I chose to let you win."

"I've been training for longer than you've been alive," she teased. "Bring it, Batman."

"Hmmm," Bruce said, reluctant only because he was currently injured and while Diana won because he stopped resisting, he still went far enough that he took considerable damage. He didn't have time for the recovery right now. He still had small children that needed to be picked up constantly, and Diana always went for his shoulders and ribs. "Sparring. First pin wins."

"Sounds good," she smirked, hopping off the computer panel and pulling her thin sweater over her head to reveal a tank top underneath.

"However," he began as he too stood up, "no bracelets."

"No belt then, or boomerangs," Diana challenged.

"Batarangs," Dick interjected. The children scrambled out of the jungle gym, running off to find chairs to sit on and chattering excitedly.

"Your silly batarangs," she agreed, and Bruce felt a smirk tug on his lips in answer to Diana's teasing grin.

"No lasso either," Bruce said, turning the tug into a frown. "If you were like Kal, we could red-sun you, but you don't have such limitations."

"In short, I could whoop your ass," Diana said without hesitation, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"No. It would just make it about skill rather than raw strength," he explained patiently.

"You're just afraid I'm going to beat you in battle in front of your prodigy," she grinned. Bruce gave up trying to reason with her, and instead just walked over to the sparring mats. Diana peeled off her shoes, and hopped up on the mats, grabbing her large mass of hair and twirling it into a bun on top of her head effortlessly. The boys rolled three computer chairs up close to the mats, and hopped into them, obviously very excited about the fight about to commence.

"Fair fight. No biting, clawing, or hair-pulling," Bruce said firmly. "Keep it clean."

"It would be unjust to do anything else," Diana agreed, and they both fell into their fighting stances effortlessly.

"What is going on out here, Master Bruce, Miss Prince?" came Alfred's prim voice from the other side of this part of the cave just before they'd began.

"Broose and Diana are gonna spar!" Tim said excitedly.

"Absolutely not!" Alfred said immediately. "Master Bruce has healing ribs and stitches that should not be put under any strain from fighting with goddesses." Immediately, the children cried out in annoyance and

whined.

"You are injured?" Diana asked incredulously, and rucked his shirt up to reveal the bruises on his ribs. "Bruce! Why did you let me goad you into a fight if you are injured?"

"I can handle it," Bruce said, batting her hands off. Diana put her hands on her hips angrily, and said with her goddess-voice of doom:

"Don't be like that."

Luckily, Damian's baby monitor began making scratchy noises, and Bruce excused himself, dodging both Diana and Alfred's verbal bullets as he hurriedly made his way up to Damian. The little toddler was curled up on his stomach on the huge bed, making tiny sobbing sounds, and Bruce crawled up on the bed with no hesitation.

"**Hi little prince, baba's here**," he hurried to soothe, cradling Damian to his chest and thinking it was a nightmare. Night terrors usually meant you didn't remember what you'd been dreaming of, but children could have normal nightmares too. Damian's little sobs became hiccups as Bruce draped his little blanket over him, laying down. "**What's wrong?**"

Damian didn't answer, sniffling, and Bruce pulled him a little closer, bewildered.

"**Tell me what's wrong, Damian**," he murmured, stroking the back of his head.

"**Want Cla**'," he sobbed, and Bruce blinked incredulously.

"**Okay, Damian, you know what we're going to do? We're going to call Clark! Here we go**," he said hurriedly, laying him down on the uninjured side of his ribcage and pulling his phone out of his pocket. He dialed Clark, who picked up in four rings.

"What's the matter, is everything okay?" came Clark's immediate, worried response.

"Talk to Damian please, he won't tell me what's wrong," Bruce said, and held the phone to Damian's ear gently, rubbing his back.

"Cla'," Damian hiccuped when he heard Clark's voice, and Bruce tried to discern what had happened. A nightmare, of course, but what had shaken him so much? "**Come back**."

Maybe abandonment, then. Bruce had thought about how Talia visiting had affected his kids, but only the ones who wanted to hurt her. Damian had to watch his mother leave him and then his father yell at him. Internally, Bruce berated himself for not being a better dad.

By now, Damian wasn't so much talking to Clark as mumbling 'come back' into Bruce's shirt, and Bruce took the phone away from Damian again, who was half-way to knocking himself out with his crying, and held it to his own ear.

"You're not actually going to-" Bruce began, but there was the distinct click of Clark hanging up, and he closed his eyes and sighed. "You have him wrapped around your finger, azizam."

He grabbed Damian's bat, trying to soothe him with that when Damian still wouldn't stop crying, and when that didn't work, he got up on his feet, gently bobbing as he walked out of the room, out into the hallway. He tried humming something calming, but Damian was restless, sobbing and making displeased noises no matter what.

They were in the entrance hall when Bruce got an alert on his phone that Clark was flying in over the backyard, and a second later, there was the sound of the veranda doors opening. Bruce moved to greet him in the dining room.

"I can't believe you still have a job," he said incredulously.

"Cla'!" Damian shouted across the whole dining room, and Clark was there in a burst of superspeed. Bruce gave him a pissed look, which Clark promptly ignored.

"I was out with Lois chasing down a lead on one of her stories, Perry's not going to notice as long as I'm back by the time she's back," he explained hurriedly, before turning to Damian. "**Hi little prince, what's the matter?**"

Damian reached a hand out, and Clark moved to take him, but that made the little toddler's arm snatch back immediately.

"No!" he said loudly, holding just the one arm out again. Bewildered, Clark came close enough that he could hold the back of Damian's head. Bruce's heart was sort of warmed by the fact that despite Damian wanting Clark, he didn't want him enough to leave his father's arms.

When the reporter was close enough, Damian grabbed his shirt and pulled insistently until Clark was practically pressed up against Bruce and Damian, Damian smushed between their two chests. Only then did he sort of settle, and sigh like he was relieved.

Bruce and Clark stared at each other in mute shock for a while, before Clark felt the tips of his ears heat up. Bruce smelled like that expensive shampoo of his and like his kids and Alfred's cooking. He was warm where their arms were touching around Damian, and his icy blue eyes flicked between the now silent Damian and his face.

"I think it's because of... Talia," Bruce said slowly after a few moments of silence, meeting Clark's electric blue eyes up close. There was less than half a foot of space between their foreheads. Clark sort of smelled a bit like smoke, probably from rescuing someone from a fire, along with the regular cologne he had that smelled like sandalwood, because his father had taught him that's what a gentleman wore. "Her leaving yesterday, I mean."

"Oh," Clark exhaled, his warm breath fanning over Bruce's cheek. Bruce shifted his arms a little, and so did Clark, so that they could stand close enough for Damian's comfort without anyone falling over. That meant that most of their arms were touching. Bruce's were bare, since he'd taken off the sweater after he'd been outside, whilst Clark was still wearing a jacket. Bruce could still feel his warmth through it. "Yeah, I was sort of wondering when he'd break down about that."

"I guess I don't have a lot of parameters concerning little Damian's capability to handle stressful situations," Bruce said automatically, sort of stuck looking at the way Clark's eyebrows were furrowed in concern for Damian. They both looked down at the toddler, who was resting his head against Clark's chest, holding onto his shirt, and the other holding onto his father's. One of Clark's curls brushed against Bruce's forehead, and Bruce reminded himself that there was no reason for him to get flustered by being close to Clark.

"**Were you scared I was going to leave, Damian?**" Clark asked the little tot, who only rubbed his cheek against Clark's chest a little, obviously seeking comfort.

"**Is this about mama?**" Bruce asked just as soft, and Damian sniffled, his little lip wobbling again. "**Damian, mama isn't always the nicest, but baba would never let her hurt you, okay?**"

"**Neither would I**," Clark added fiercely, and Bruce felt a little flutter

in his stomach at that. Odd. Usually, Bruce probably wouldn't have appreciated Clark sounding so possessive, since he rarely did.

Of course, usually Clark would never be able to get this close to Damian without Damian having insulted him at least twice and made some threat of violence.

"**Mama won't hurt me. Miss her. Miss Cla**'," Damian mumbled.

"**I'm right here, little prince**," Clark promised, stroking Damian's cheek with the back of one hand. "**Right here. If I have to go, I promise I'll come back.**"

"**Promise?**" Damian asked, leaning his head up enough so that he could look Clark in the eye.

"**Promise**," Clark declared. Damian turned to look up at his dad, looking concerned.

"**Baba?**" Damian asked, and Bruce felt a little like he'd been gutpunched.

"**Of course, Damian. I'll always come for you. I promise**," he hurried to get out, and Damian leaned over at his chest again, letting a breath out, before wiggling like he wanted to be put down.

Bruce did as told, and put Damian down on his feet. The boy toddled over to the kitchen, clutching his bat to his chest as he went.

"Am I the only one who feels like we've signed some sort of contract or something?" Clark asked, a baffled look on his face as Damian called for Titus, dragging his blanket after him.

"No," Bruce murmured, narrowing his eyes after his toddler in consideration. "You're not."

"When's tea time?" came Jason's shout from upstairs, and Bruce and Clark emerged in the entrance hall again. They both blinked at the sight before them.

On top of the landing, the rest of the boys and Diana were standing. Tim looked like a warrior-princess, one of the foam swords in hand and what was Diana's own tiara on his forehead, along with his white-cherry dress, which was now dusty and had cobwebs all over it. Jason's hair was also full of cobwebs, along with Dick's, and their shirts, which were previously this morning bright blue and maroon,

were now splotchy with dust, which meant they'd been wrestling somewhere again. Diana had her lasso in hand, and was beaming at them.

"Where have you been?" Bruce asked incredulously.

"Exploring. Did you know that your ancestors grew impressive beards?" Diana said fascinatedly.

"We went up in the attic," Jason explained. "Bunch of Wayne-ancestor portraits up there. When's tea?"

"I'm glad you found their beards... Impressive?" Bruce said slowly, furrowing his eyebrows. What were you even supposed to say to that? "Concerning the tea, soon."

"Clark!" Diana said joyfully, leaping from the top of the stairs over to them. The boys watched on with wide eyes.

"Don't even think about attempting that, last time I checked none of you had superpowers," Bruce warned immediately, pointing a stern finger at them. Defiantly, Jason immediately slid down the banister, and Dick laughed and followed suit, along with Tim. Well, at least they weren't trying to imitate Diana.

"Diana!" Clark said in surprise, getting a firm hug from the goddess. He looked over at Bruce for an explanation, and Bruce gave a pointed look towards the children. Clark grinned at him. "Popping in to say hi to the kids?"

"They're cute," Diana smiled at him. "I had the day off."

"Yeah, fair enough," Clark chuckled. "Hi guys!"

"Hi Clark!" Tim chirped, before dashing over to Bruce and tugging on his pantleg. "I need your phone."

"For what?" Bruce asked suspiciously.

"Wanna text Kon. Chop chop," he said, and Bruce raised both eyebrows at him. Tim shrank a little, giving Bruce a small smile. "Please?"

"That's better," Bruce agreed, hauling his phone out. "Is school out yet?"

"Probably not," Tim said, snatching the phone and disappearing into

the kitchen. Diana snickered, and Clark smiled wide.

"I'm taking that phone back in fifteen minutes, chum, keep it short," Bruce called after him. Alfred appeared out of the kitchen, holding Damian on his hip like he weighed nothing and a tea cup in the other hand. Considering he'd hauled Bruce around like dead weight a lot, that wasn't all that surprising.

"Tea will be served in the library in twenty minutes. Master Richard, Master Jason, I suggest you go freshen up a bit. Bring Master Timothy with you, he should have been more considerate of tea time if he wanted time to text his boyfriend," he said, and Jason and Dick took off for the kitchen, reappearing in a moment with Tim on Jason's back as they walked back up the stairs. "Miss Prince, if I could trouble you for a moment?"

"Of course," Diana said. Unceremoniously, Damian was handed over to Diana, who beamed at him.

"Master Clark, please wash up a bit. You smell like a burning building," Alfred said to the now flushing Clark, holding out the cup of tea to Bruce. "Master Bruce, if you'd show our guest to the library and then take this to Miss Cassandra in the infirmary. The tests say she should stay there for a bit, I left them out on the screen for you, but her condition has only gotten better since this morning."

"Yeah, alright. I'm sorry. There was a fire," Clark hurried to say.

"Of course, sir. I'm sure your actions were very heroic," Alfred agreed, before disappearing back into the kitchen.

"Wow. I forget it's actually your butler that runs your house," Diana said thoughtfully.

"I don't have the time, I'm too busy being a billionaire and Batman," Bruce said in a deadpan, and Diana rolled her eyes at him, before leading the way up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

> We're almost at 1500 kudos!!! That's sick you guys, thank you so much for reading this lil thing that blew up into a slightly longer fic than I'd originally imagined. It be that way sometimes.
> Btw, azizam is sorta like 'sweetheart' in farsi. Ish. Anyway, I'm

glad to have you reading this, you're amazing, thank you so so much for all your encouragement and general amazingness!! Hope you enjoyed!!! <3<3

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After tea, Clark hurried back to work, whilst Diana stayed, watching Mulan with the boys. Jason immediately asked if he could cut Stephanie's hair with a sword, which Bruce tried to put a stop to, honestly not sure if Stephanie would agree to it or not. Hopefully she wouldn't catch wind of it.

Diana went home by dinner, which Clark had come back for, and Bruce skipped it to sit downstairs with Cassandra, who was back on an IV after she'd worsened a bit. Alfred had given her a serum to battle whatever it was off, but Bruce was still a little concerned. He probably shouldn't have let Stephanie move her around so early.

That was where he was sat now, stroking her hair as she dozed on her cot. There was the sound of little feet on stone outside in the main part of the cave, and Bruce was just about to get up and scold whoever it was, probably Tim, since Dick would be skipping, and Jason would be stomping, when the curtain was opened, and Tim walked in.

"How did you get down here?" Bruce asked incredulously. He'd taken Titus off the list of authourities allowed in the cave now, even, trying to make sure that they wouldn't be down here without him. Why did he even try?

"As long as you can get Clark to stand close enough when you turn the time, the clock will still open," Tim said, crawling up into Bruce's lap. Of course. The sensors wouldn't scan someone plastered to the clock, which they knew very well. This was probably a team effort. Sometimes he marveled at his children.

"I guess I underestimate you," Bruce said out loud, and Tim patted his cheek a little derisively, something he'd most definitely picked up from Diana. Tim looked over at Cass.

"Is she gonna be okay?" he asked quietly, and Bruce sighed, shifting Tim on his lap a little so that the boy wasn't stabbing his little heels right into Bruce's crotch.

"We think so. She's been playing with you, right? That's a sign of improvement," he said, and Tim leaned back against Bruce's chest. He was probably going to miss that when they were back to their normal ages. They were so easy to pick up now, easy to juggle around in comparison to when they were older. Dick had a habit of launching his younger brothers and Cassandra into the air whenever he felt the battle needed it, but that wasn't the same as getting to cradle them like this.

"Yeah," Tim agreed. "When's Zatanna going to come and make us older again?"

"I don't know, Tim. It could be a while," he sighed, glancing back up at Cassandra. "Why, are you eager to grow back up again?"

"I don't really know what that would be like, so I'm not, not really," Tim said distantly, also looking at Cassandra. "I'd just like to be taller than Jason so I can kick him in the head."

Bruce huffed his amusement, and ruffled Tim's hair affectionately.

"Sadly, Tim, you don't ever get taller than Jason," he told him, and Tim gave him a scandalized look. Bruce chuckled out loud this time. "That doesn't mean you're unable to kick him in the head. However, he usually wears a helmet, so I don't think it's the most strategically sound plan."

"Well I could kick him in the shin, but I can do that now too," Tim complained.

"Don't go kicking your brother."

"'S not like he doesn't deserve it," the boy grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest petulantly. Bruce pressed a fond kiss to the top of Tim's head.

"You'll figure something non-violent out for your old man, right?" he said, half-joking, and Tim rolled his eyes at him.

"We'll see."

"I have faith in you," Bruce said, and Tim blinked up at him, before smiling at him. Wow. That had been a while ago, last time. Mostly when Bruce saw Tim, he was hidden underneath the Red Robin cowl, or snoring into his cereal, or on his way to school or the company or whatever. He wondered when he'd last sat near-adult Tim down.

"Clark said you should come upstairs," Tim relayed.

"What for?"

"'Cos he and Dick were gonna do a number they've been practicing the last half-hour, and Dick really wanted you to see it."

"Number?" Bruce repeated in question, standing up and shifting Tim over to his hip. He turned Cassandra's hand over, and she cracked an eye open to watch him tap out '**We're going upstairs**' on the back of her hand. She nodded, and closed her eyes again, sighing quietly.

"Yeah, like a flip-number. With flips," Tim explained, like Bruce was being an idiot.

"Ah. Of course," Bruce agreed, climbing the stairs with a small smile on his face.

Bruce was actually a bit proud of himself for tucking everyone into their beds and getting them to *stay* there. Dick was asleep within seconds of his head hitting the pillow, Jason yawned so big his jaw cracked when Bruce tucked him into a little burrito on the bed, and Tim gave him the most trouble by demanding he read him a story. The whole Peter Pan book he'd somehow snatched from the library, and nothing less than the whole book. Bruce was pretty sure it was a scheme of his to trap Bruce in his bed, but Tim's plan didn't pan out, tired as he was, and he fell asleep about fifty pages in.

Tim was tucked into a little burrito too, and Bruce walked back to his own room, stopping himself from doing a victory dance only because he was too tired for one. His lack of sleeping the past four nights was catching up to him, and he was looking forward to a night spread like a starfish, only with Damian in his co-sleeper, and maybe getting Alfred to heat up a heating pad for his sore ribs and back.

Stephanie had agreed to keep watch on the monitors tonight instead of go out, looking serious enough about it that Bruce was convinced she would. She definitely hadn't liked Talia getting her in a grip last time, and was a little bit on the war-path. Bruce was fine with that. That meant she paid attention. He also internally realised that whenever Talia showed up, she seemed to fan the flames of hatred in all of his children.

Whilst Stephanie sat by the monitors, Babs roamed Gotham along with

Roy, and Cassandra slept in the med-bay. A nice, calm night, hopefully without Damian having any night terrors.

Of course, the universe heard his thoughts and laughed at him, and Damian wouldn't even lie down on the bed unless Clark was on the bed with him, screaming his head off whenever Bruce tried to nudge him down on his back. Clark gave Bruce a sort of worried look that told Bruce exactly how willing Clark was to sacrifice himself for Damian's sleep.

"He'll pass out some time," Bruce said firmly, crouching down to meet eyes with his son and meeting an absolute death-glare back that was all Talia. Finally, after realizing how ridiculous it was to try and glare a toddler into doing something, Bruce sighed, gripping the end of the bed firmly,

"Bruce, it's fine, really," Clark began saying, until Damian interrupted him.

"**Cla' stays! Baba can't say no!**" he shouted. Bruce inwardly thanked his ancestors for using good, solid materials for the manor walls. If he woke up one of the other kids, Bruce was definitely not getting his night of relaxation.

"**Why not?**" Bruce asked, honestly curious.

"**Promised!**" Damian said, looking at Bruce with a wobbly lip.

"**Promised what?**"

"**To stay**," Damian sniffled, and Bruce internally groaned. He really hoped Zatanna would show up soon, so Damian could stop tugging on his heartstrings like they were his personal toys.

"**Fine. He stays**," Bruce said with his eyes narrowed, and Damian flopped back on the sheets without resistance when he nudged him again, cuddling his bat and closing his eyes. "I'm taking a shower," Bruce declared, and saw Clark nod mutely out of the corner of his eye.

He stood in the shower for a solid twenty minutes, letting the warm water beat down on his tense shoulders. Fine. It was *fine*. He could handle Clark staying in his bed for one night. It wouldn't be weird, they were mature adults and had shared cramped quarters before. At least now it was a Cal-king, and he wouldn't have to press up against him from shoulder to knee to fit.

Of course, Damian couldn't let him have space either. The moment he was back in bed, Damian held his one hand out, mumbling for his baba. He already had Clark's undershirt, which he was apparently sleeping in, in a very firm grip, and made grabby hands for Bruce. Clark had an amused look on his face as Bruce curled around Damian, a hand on his little back as the toddler closed his eyes again.

"You grumble a lot, but you like this," Clark accused, a fond smile on his lips. His head was on one of Bruce's pillows, and the glasses were laying on the nightstand. The smell of him was already sinking into the sheets, and on some low level of consciousness, Bruce wondered how long the smell would last. As it was right now, he barely registered the thought, as he was horizontal, nicely warm, and had Damian's little snoozing breathing filling his ears.

"It's... Nice, sometimes," Bruce admitted, staring down at Damian's squished, fat little cheeks against the cover. He was in the 'My daddy's a superhero!' shirt again, because Bruce could barely stand to look at it now, but Damian still liked it. Compromise. "As much as I enjoy having them all here, I also wish they were old enough to be on their own. I think Tim's pulled so many times on my tailored pants just today that I'll have to have them redone."

"Ah, the joys of fatherhood," Clark chuckled, releasing a sigh. His breath again fanned over Bruce's face. Minty. Too close. When Bruce tried to slowly roll away, Damian made a noise in his sleep, making grabby-hands with the little hand that wasn't curled up in Clark's shirt. Bruce let out a huff of laughter, and dropped a kiss on Damian's dark head of hair, letting the toddler grab his sleeping shirt as well as Clark's. "The great Batman, defeated by a toddler."

"He's already got Superman and Wonder Woman wrapped around his pinkie, why shouldn't Batman cave?" Bruce tossed back, finally settling his head on his pillow and curving his body around Damian. Clark mirrored him, shoving a hand up underneath the pillow as he chuckled.

"Our last line of defense has fallen. How will the earth survive the cuteness?" Clark chuckled again, and Bruce huffed out a laugh.

"How was work today? When you weren't here," Bruce murmured. Clark's voice was low and the volume soft. He'd make excellent white noise.

"Good. Lois has a big story that's about to break, she's mostly just

trailing me along as a favor so I don't have to do any heavy lifting right now. So we were chasing leads and she was typing on a rough draft. Perry's thinking about making it into a series," Clark mumbled, obviously also tired.

"What's the story?"

"Large fashion companies using child labor and giving them pennies for 16 hours of hard work."

"Something you picked up as Superman?" Bruce inquired.

"Nope. She doesn't need my help," Clark said, a little proudly. Bruce smiled a little.

"Sure you can't get her to take you back?" Clark chuckled a little awkwardly.

"Nah. We work better as friends anyway."

"If you say so."

The door opened slightly, and Alfred appeared with a warm water bottle in hand.

"Your heating pad, Sir," he said, not batting an eyelash at their current state.

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce said, sitting up to take it. Alfred ignored his outstretched hand, and gently shoved him back into the sheets. Whilst Clark snickered at how Bruce had just done the exact same thing to Damian, Alfred focused on laying the pad down on Bruce's side. He hissed when Alfred pressed the bottle against him further, but relaxed when the heat began to spread and Alfred's hands retreated.

"Of course, Sir. Shall I get the lights for you?"

"Yes please," Bruce sighed into the pillow, closing his eyes. The butler did as told, flicking the lights off before disappearing and shutting the door behind himself.

"Do your ribs still hurt?" Clark asked after a few moments of blissful silence, and Bruce cracked an eye open, already annoyed. He considered ignoring him and falling asleep, but recognized that Clark probably wouldn't stop bugging him about it and start to carry things for him like he was an old lady if he didn't nip this in the bud.

"Not that much. Caught Dick when he dropped from a chandelier earlier today. The only reason I'm letting Alfred dote on me like this," he grumbled. "Now quiet. You're always nagging about how I should sleep, now let me."

"Sorry. G'night Bruce," Clark said softly. Bruce hummed in response and closed his eyes, rubbing Damian's back in sleepy circles.

When Bruce woke, he let himself drag it out a little. He felt surprisingly rested and safe, but maybe that was just his body's way of telling him that staying awake with only a few hours sleep for four days wasn't worth it. Blue eyes remained closed as he felt Damian's little hand still loosely twisted into his shirt, curled his toes and shifted his knees, trying to gently get rid of the sleep in his limbs.

Finally, he clenched his hand, one was under his pillow, and the other was somewhere warm, on warm skin. Immediately, Bruce's eyes snapped open, and he took in where his left hand had wandered. His hand was on warm skin. Bruce'd shoved his hand up under Clark's undershirt sometime during the night, and was currently cradling his smooth, warm waist. In his sleep, Clark had shifted closer, probably from Bruce's *hand* on his *waist*, oh god.

His eyes flicked up to Clark's still closed eyes, and Bruce took a moment to make sure his heartbeat was still slow and measured, listening in on Clark's deep, definitely-asleep breathing. Thankfully, the Man of Steel was a heavy sleeper, had to be if you had superhearing and wanted to get any semblance of sleep, and Bruce was able to move the hand off of his waist without him noticing, instead wrapping it around Damian's small form.

Biological compulsions needed to stay the fuck away from him. Bruce had better things to do than ruin a friendship with a powerful ally, and, admittedly... A good friend.

Instead of focusing on Clark, which would undoubtedly bring his heartrate up and wake the man, he focused on Damian. The toddler was peacefully still sleeping, drooling on his plush bat. He was happy not to be awoken by Damian thrashing and screaming, of course, but he wasn't used to waking up before him either. Bruce shifted, looking over his shoulder at the clock. Almost seven. That meant...

There was a bang as Tim burst through the door to the master bedroom, screaming as Jason chased him with what looked like a

batarang, which he shouldn't be able to have in the first place. Clark jumped in the air in pure shock, and Damian with him, immediately throwing out a kick that would have hit Bruce right in the solar plexus if he hadn't grabbed the little foot.

"He's gonna kill me, save me!" Tim shouted, hopping up on the bed and running for the headboard, where he then began trying to scale the canopy. Bruce snatched Damian out of the way of his feet in the last second, as Clark rolled onto the floor with a thump.

"I'll save you!" came a fake-dark voice as Dick jumped and rolled into the room, wearing what looked like a severely too large bat-cowl with the accompanying cape. One of the older ones, at least, where the cape was almost three fourths of it's original length due to an incident with one of the Joker's traps.

Bruce grabbed the now upset Damian and held him to his chest as he rolled up onto his knees, grabbing Jason's leg as he hopped up on the bed as he chased after Tim, and pulling so that he did a little flip in the air before landing on his back with a startled laugh. Without looking, Bruce pulled the batarang from his hand, tossed it on the floor behind him, and then caught the cartwheeling Dick before his head hit the headboard. The cowl was pretty big on him, and kept slipping before his eyes.

"Boys," Bruce growled out, and Tim froze up there in the canopy, his leg curled around one of the bedposts, along with his brothers who were now on their backs on the bed. The only sound in the room was Damian's little sniffling, and Bruce used the hand that wasn't holding Damian to press to his mouth to stifle the little laugh that almost bubbled out of him.

His silly, creative boys. Baby-proofing was much harder when it came to his children. How had they even gotten into the cave again? Clark hadn't been there to stand close enough, seeing as he was in Bruce's bed, with Bruce's hand on-

Bruce cut his own thoughts off, shaking his head as if to dislodge the thought.

"Take the cowl off, Dick," he said finally, but Dick saw the mirth in his eyes, and grinned.

"Nah. I think I look good in it. What do you think, Clark?" he tossed over to his left, and Clark sat up, rubbing the back of his head with a startled look on his face.

"Brings out your eyes," he groaned, rubbing his eyes too. Bruce used his now free hand to flip Damian around so their fronts were pressed together. Damian always seemed to prefer that when in need of comfort, and Bruce rubbed his back soothingly to stop the little sniffles. "What possessed the three of you to burst into a bedroom with a sleeping baby?"

"Thought it might be fun," Jason said with a wolfish grin, not seemingly repentant. Tim just gave Damian a suspicious look from the canopy.

"Get down from there," Bruce directed at Tim, and the seven-year-old sulkily slid down the canopy until he was sitting on the headboard.

"He was trying to kill me, y'know!" he said petulantly, and Jason aimed fingerguns at Tim, making shooting sounds. Tim made 'see?!' noises, waving towards Jason with wide eyes. Dick snickered, and pulled the cowl off his face but kept it scrunched up in the back, and climbed up into the canopy on the foot-end of the bed.

"Jason, stop that. Speaking of, how did you get back into the goddamn cave?" Bruce asked exasperatedly.

"Stephanie added Titus to the list of admittances again," Dick explained, dangling upside down from the dark fabric of the canopy. "So Cass wouldn't have to sleep alone in the cave. It gets ookey."

"Ookey-spooky," Jason said, nodding gravely. Bruce grit his teeth. Yeah, he couldn't argue with that, really. He would berate Stephanie, but she'd done what was best for Cassandra. He was just annoyed that his kids kept getting into the cave. God, he hoped Zatanna showed up soon. Otherwise he'd have to figure out some system that the dog got, but not the kids. He wasn't up for the challenge, but he would have to be. He was trying to keep them safe, but of course, why would they listen to him about boring stuff like that when there was a batcave to explore?

"Fair enough," Bruce admitted, and all of his children nodded sagely. "Jason, stop threatening Tim; Dick, give me the cowl before you get stuck and choke on it; Tim, get down from the headboard. If you're scared that Jason's going to get you, you can piggyback Clark. Let's try to get down to breakfast in one piece, please."

"Hey, it was my turn to piggyback on Clark!" Jason said incredulously as Tim hopped down from the headboard and skipped over to where Clark was waiting by the edge of the bed. Bruce helped Dick down on

the ground, and tossed the cape over his shoulder, adjusting Damian so his face was on the same shoulder. The toddler quieted down when Bruce gave him his bat to hug again.

"Only boys who haven't snatched anything from the batcave get to piggyback Clark," Bruce declared, and Jason gaped incredulously as he rolled up onto his hands and knees on the bed.

"Tim took something too!" he exclaimed without prompting, pointing to the seven-year-old. Ah, Bruce's favorite kind of tattling: the uncalled for kind.

"Snitch!" Tim hissed, and Bruce realized that it had been a ridiculous assumption in the first place, that Tim wouldn't have taken something. Been less obvious about it, definitely, but when his brothers did it? Yeah, Bruce was an idiot.

He pinned Tim with a look, and Tim grudgingly pulled a bola out of his sweatpants. Clark's eyes were wide as Bruce took it out of his small hands, bending down to pick up the batarang. Their eyes met, and Bruce raised an eyebrow at him, indicating that he move. The reporter hesitated.

"Put him down on the ground, Kal," the other man said firmly.

"But-" Tim said, eyes wide.

"I said that only boys who haven't snatched anything from the batcave get to piggyback Clark, didn't I Tim?" Bruce reminded him. Tim pouted, and Clark slowly set him down on the ground again, much to the boy's chagrin. "Now. Dining room. Go."

Tim stomped out of the room, with Dick close after, and Jason shoved his hands into his pockets, muttering angrily as he slouched out of the room.

"Louder if you want me to hear you, Jason," Bruce said pointedly, even if he heard exactly the many choice words the ten-year-old was muttering under his breath. He didn't want to fight right now, but bringing it to Jason's attention that he heard was giving him a warning, at least.

"Whatever!" Jason groaned loudly, tossing his head back in annoyance before he took off down the hallway.

"Can you make sure they don't kill each other when they get

downstairs? I'd like to keep the manor standing a few more days," Bruce said, handing over Damian to Clark. The toddler didn't even fuss, just sighed and toyed with his bat a little.

"Where are you going?" Clark asked, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"The other downstairs to check on Cassandra, and put these back," he said, swinging the bola a little. "Keep Tim away from-"

"-The coffee, and Dick from the Lucky Charms, yeah, B, I know the drill," Clark laughed as they stepped out of the room and went their separate ways.

As had been previously stated, Titus could now get into the batcave again, and he was sleeping peacefully at the end of Cassandra's cot, her feet nestled underneath his large body. When Bruce entered the room, he opened one eye to see who it was, but decided Bruce was uninteresting, and fell right back asleep again.

Cassandra was feeling better today, supposedly. She insisted she felt fine, but Alfred had still put an EEG on her sometime during the night, and the machine was registering her brainwaves. The moment Bruce saw the machine, he looked for a sticky-note, and found a green one, with Alfred's neat handwriting.

Mostly just a safety precaution, Master Bruce, to check for encephalitis. Her head has been aching, and the seizure earlier on made me a bit suspicious. Just wanted to make sure.

"It's fine," Cassandra began protesting the moment Bruce touched her neck.

"Does that hurt?" he asked worriedly. She batted his hands off, and frowned at him.

"Fine!" she repeated, louder, and Bruce frowned back. They had a bit of a stare-off for a full minute, Cassandra's look insisitng, and Bruce's thoughtful.

"If you feel *any* worse, you tell me immediately," he said firmly. "Do you have your phone?"

Cassandra shrugged, and Bruce dug around the covers, coming up with a smartphone that was probably Stephanie's, judging from the purple case. He gave it to her.

"Keep it close. Anything, Cassandra. I mean it," he said, and she looked at him in consideration for a while.

"Okay," she said softly, giving him a slightly tender look.

"What?" he asked, brushing a strand of her hair out of her face, being careful not to disturb the electrodes stuck to her forehead.

"If only you could be like this with the Robins," she murmured. "Maybe you wouldn't all hurt so much."

"They would not like it if I was affectionate with them," Bruce scoffed, but felt a sort of dull ache in his ribcage that had nothing to do with his injured ribs. Yes, if only.

"Why?"

"Because not only are most of them young adult boys, I also haven't been... Very affectionate in the first place," Bruce said slowly. He wasn't sure where Cassandra was going with this, but she was wise beyond her years and also very, very observant. Better than him, by far. She'd get him where she wanted him, eventually.

"So?" she questioned, without hesitation. "Are now. Can be, later."

"They would think I was drugged, probably," Bruce mused. Cassandra shook her head a little.

"Not after this. Touch. Kiss. Love," she demanded, their eyes meeting. Her conviction was hard to shake, and her look too. Bruce finally caved, and took her slim hand in his. It should be smooth and warm, but she's like him, their callouses catch against each other, and she's sort of clammy. He kissed the back of her hand anyway.

"If you so much as want a little water, I'm at your beck and call. Okay?" he said firmly, and she rolled her eyes with a small smile, shooing him off. "I'll have Alfred bring you some breakfast, alright?"

After placing the things the boys had brought up back in their respective places, he hurried upstairs to get some food before they were all out.

The moment he stepped into the room, Clark took off for upstairs to get changed, their sides brushing as they tried to go through the same doorway at nearly the same time. Bruce sat down to take over Clark's job of feeding Damian without letting Damian know he was being fed,

and chatted with Tim about what they wanted to do today. Dick and Jason finished their breakfast as quickly as they could, and innocently asked if they could leave the table.

That set Bruce's alarms off. Jason? Asking for permission? What a sight. He agreed, if they took their plates into the kitchen. Hopefully, the sight of Alfred and his little purse of the lips would stop whatever plans they had right in their tracks.

Clark came back around that time, in a horrid suit that didn't fit him properly, and with the glasses on. Bruce scowled at him, and Clark rolled his eyes.

"It's my other aspect, I can't just not do that! People will find out I'm Superman!" Clark said before the other man could complain, and grabbed a paper towel from the roll standing on the table to wipe Damian's hands down.

"Cla'! Up!" the toddler demanded, and Clark laughed, lifting him over to place him in his lap. Damian wiggled happily, and Clark began to eat his breakfast over him, offering Damian the occasional waffle-piece.

"I just wish the other aspect of your personality could include better-fitting suits. If I have to look at that polyester disaster long enough, I might actually torch it," Bruce threatened, and Clark rolled his eyes.

"Shall I fetch the flame-thrower, Master Bruce?" Alfred asked as he came into the room with a tray with two glasses of juice and a teacup on it.

"We have a flame-thrower?" Tim asked, wide-eyed. Alfred placed one of the glasses of juice down in front of him, the other in front of Bruce, as well as the teacup.

"Alfred's just joking, Tim. We don't have a flame-thrower," Bruce smiled at the seven-year-old, and then met eyes with his butler, projecting a 'please don't correct me, he's going to find it and we'll all die a horrible, flame-induced death' look his way. Alfred's lips quirked into the slightest of smiles.

"Drink up, Master Timothy, you need the vitamins," the older man urged, and Tim dutifully picked the glass up and drank. Alfred blinked, obviously not used to Tim actually listening to him at breakfast, but then he took that victory and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Tim took off too, soon enough, trailing off to find his car, and around then, it was time for Clark to head off to work. Clark grabbed his messenger bag that was standing in the entrance hall, and slung it over his shoulder, getting ready to go. Bruce followed him out, looking on amused.

"Clark?" Clark turned his head back to look at his best friend, checking off his list in his head simultaneously. He had his thermos, his bag, his jacket...

"Hmm?"

"Baby."

"What?" Clark said, immediately feeling the tips of his ears heating up. When Bruce gave a pointed look at his chest, Clark looked down and met Damian's green-brown eyes. "Oh. Oh!"

"Yeah," Bruce huffed, obviously amused.

"I didn't even notice you there, buddy. Here you go, one little prince," Clark chuckled in embarrassment, handing Damian over to his father. Bruce smiled at Damian's little whine, and bounced a little on his heels.

"**Clark's leaving for work. What does that mean, Damian?**" Bruce asked pointedly, and his toddler gave him a puzzled look, before he turned back to Clark and did a little wave.

"Bye-bye?" he said in English, sounding mildly confused. Clark gasped, and Bruce smiled proudly. They'd had a little English practice yesterday, not specifically for this, but also for research purposes.

Bruce knew Damian was intelligent academically, and he spoke other languages than Farsi and English, but there was a difference between eleven-year-old Damian telling him what was crammed into his brain and watching little Damian learn how to say certain words. Once Jason cottoned on to what Bruce was doing, he taught Damian to say 'fuck', which garnered him a scolding, but he still lit up whenever Damian yelled 'fuck' in his baby-voice.

"Oh that's so precious," Clark cooed, leaning close to press kisses to Damian's chubby cheeks. The toddler giggled, and Clark straightened up again.

"Say 'bye-bye' Damian," Bruce said, and Damian waved again, and

chirped 'bye-bye'. Clark practically clutched at his heart, which Bruce scoffed at. The reporter caught sight of the clock behind Bruce on the wall, and gasped.

"Oh, I'm running late, I gotta go," he said quickly, and before Bruce could react, Clark leaned down, kissed him on the lips, and said a "See you at dinner!", before disappearing in a blur out the veranda doors.

Chapter End Notes

> Wow! 21 chapters and finally some action! This is a record for me, last time I made it 35 chapters before they smooched. Next chapter is aaall about those feels. Don't worry. This is just me being a tease and wanting to heap on the cuteness! ;) Thanks for being sweet and saying nice things about the characters and the story, you all make me want to lie down on the floor and cry with happiness. Also, there's more than 1500 kudos!!!!! how fucking insane is that, I'm so happy you have no idea!!!! Thank you thank you thank you!!! <3<3<3

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't until Clark was up above the clouds in Gotham that he caught himself, and managed to choke on the air, nearly dropping his coffee-thermos into the woods in shock. He'd kissed Bruce. He'd *kissed* Bruce.

He, Clark Kent, had kissed his best friend, *Bruce Wayne*. Right on the *lips*.

"What the hell was I thinking!" he yelled at himself, startling a nearby bird into squawking at him angrily. In shock, he'd dropped through the protective cloud-covering, and he quickly sped up above them again, hiding.

Now that he thought back, Bruce's lips had been soft and pliant underneath his lips, the kiss barely quick enough for Clark to get a response, but when he rested there, in mid-air, he used that eidetic memory of his to try and remember what Bruce's heart had sounded like when he'd kissed him. Still slow and steady. Clark nearly checked now, but he knew Bruce would think that was invasive, and oh god, if he thought *that* was intrusive, how about kissing him, right on the lips! Without his permission!

"Oh god. He's never going to talk to me again. Why did I have to have this stupid crush!" he shouted into the sky. When no reply came, he clutched at his hair. Maybe Bruce was getting the kryptonite, right now. He was still in range of the manor.

In a terror, Clark used some of his super-speed to boost out of Gotham and into Metropolis. He dropped down on top of the Daily Planet building, and sat down on the edge shakily. That had been a silly thought. Bruce wouldn't bust out the green-K without a very, very good reason. Especially not to shoot at him. He really needed to calm down.

Finally, he stood up on shaky legs, and took the stairs down to the level with the elevators, and took the elevator down to his own floor. Once he stepped into the bullpen, Lois waved at him from a cubicle,

and so did Jimmy Olsen. He walked towards them in a daze, his heart still beating hard and fast in his throat.

"Smallville! You're a bit earlier than usual," Lois smiled at him, flipping through a couple of photographs that Jimmy was obviously very excited about.

"Think I could get Perry to print them?" he asked nervously, both her and Clark.

"It might be a little hard, but we'll push for you, if you need us," she said, a bit of a shark-grin on her face. When Clark just nodded mutely, she took one look at him, and frowned. "Jimmy, buzz off. I'll tell you when we leave for the shoot later."

Jimmy glanced at Clark too, and took his photographs back, before disappearing. Lois sat him down in her chair, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Alright, what's the matter? You look like a sad puppy, spill," she demanded.

"I kissed him," Clark stated in a monotone, and saying it out loud suddenly made it much more real. God. He'd *kissed* him. What had he even been thinking?

"Wow! I'm impressed with you! After talking about it forever, you finally did it! However, from your sad, frowny face, I'm guessing he wasn't so accepting."

"I... I don't know," he mumbled incredulously. "I mean... I just... Sort of took off."

"You kissed him and took off? You wimp!" Lois said, frowning again.

"He's probably changing all the locks and the passcodes and I'll never get to see him again," Clark realized, and felt his stomach twist. No more warm smiles from Bruce, no more seeing his hair cowl-mussed, no more hearing Bruce's stupid humor and his thoughtful voice, his praising voice, nothing. If what Bruce wanted was severed contact, Bruce would chop with a machete until they were, no hesitation. He'd trained himself to be that.

His breathing picked up, and he felt a little faint, even though he was pretty sure his body had never reacted as violently nervous before. Lois' eyes widened, and she grabbed his shoulders, bending him so

that his head was between his knees. He felt a little more steady there, but he was still unfamiliarly queasy-feeling. No more fond eyerolls, probably no more teaming up during Justice League missions, Bruce going off with a different partner, Diana would kick his goddamn ass for this-

"My god, Clark, deep breaths! Jesus. Don't you think this can be seen as an opportunity rather than a huge mistake?" she asked, a hand on his back as he hyperventliated onto his shins. "Geeze, Smallville, you need a paper bag?"

"I don't know," Clark gasped. “I’ve ruined everything. Ten years of friendship, irrevocably ruined because I’m a lovesick idiot who can’t keep his hands to himself!”

“Kent-“

“I mean, he’s just been so amazing and loving now that his kids are young again, and he loves them so much, I deluded myself into thinking he might love me too,” he groaned, putting his face in his hands.

“Clark-“

“I shouldn’t have stayed with him. I should’ve listened to him. All that happens from me staying, is someone getting hurt, only it wasn’t the kids, it was me!”

“*Listen to me*,” Lois said, grabbing his chin and making him meet her eyes. “Look. Clark, honey, I doubt you’ve ruined a ten-year-long friendship with just one kiss. If he doesn’t want to be friends with you after one single kiss, it wasn’t that much of a friendship in the first place. Besides, this is a prime time for you to grab Batman by the ears and make him listen to you! Tell him you love him and want to take care of his children forever and his pets and whatever! It's about damn time, honey."

Lois' eyes were more violet-blue than his, disturbingly clear and wise. Clark swallowed hard. She only used the generalized nicknames whenever she was taking pity on him.

"You think so?" he asked, his voice small. She smiled, and patted his cheek.

"Clark, sweetheart, if I had children and you tried to live with me for two weeks, adding onto my stress-levels, I would kick you out, ass

first. There's no doubt that he likes you too, at least not in my eyes. And Ma, right? She says that too, at least that's what she told you, right?"

Clark nodded a little, and Lois smiled at him.

"Don't worry, Smallville. You'll catch your bat," she said teasingly. "Besides, is there anything that indicates that he *doesn't* like you?"

"I mean... He's always been a bit abrasive, but that's just his personality. And, I mean... We slept in the same bed last night," Clark nearly whispered, like they were teenagers at a sleepover, and her eyebrows shot up.

"Oh really?" she smirked.

"Look, nothing happened, it was just to calm his youngest, he's been having nightmares and been restless lately," he hurried to add. Her smirk was still devilish.

"Oh, hon, he's ripe for the picking, I don't see how you're not already in his spandex."

"He wears kevlar, and you're disgusting," Clark told her, and she snickered.

"Whatever you say, lover-boy. Breathe a bit, and then come with me and Jimmy."

"Where are we going?" he asked, finally feeling calm enough to sit up all the way. Lois really was a great friend.

"Interview I set up, Jimmy's promised to catch the exact moment they realize I know what they're doing so I can make it my lockscreen," she said a little evilly, tapping her nails against his desk briefly.

"You're a cruel woman," Clark said fondly, and Lois rolled her eyes.

"I just want to see justice done. And enjoy it thoroughly," she corrected, stepping out of his cubicle and retreating to her own desk.

He wouldn't let Bruce push him away, Clark decided. If Bruce told him no, he could go back to being just very good friends again, however painful that would be, because he didn't want to lose Bruce. If all he could have was loving him from a distance, that's what he would have to do. But if there was a chance... He had to at least try.

After Clark disappeared, Bruce stood stock-still for a good minute, processing, and then he made himself relax. Damian grabbed his hair and pulled to get his attention when yelling hadn't, and then Bruce had to pay attention enough to scold him for it, saying that wasn't how you nicely got someone to listen to you.

Just when Damian had looked apologetic and chastised enough that Bruce was satisfied, there was a yelp and a bang from the other room, and then Bruce had to take a silently crying Dick down to the med-ward to stitch up a gash on his forehead he'd gotten from Jason pulling on his arm when he was standing on the coffee table.

What they'd been trying to do on top of the coffee table, Bruce couldn't get out of either of them,

When Dick was situated in the same bed as Cassandra, who promised to keep him there until Alfred managed to get down here, Bruce had to go on a hunt for Jason, who, sensing that he was in trouble, had disappeared almost into thin air.

Once he did find him, Jason refused to climb down from on top of the ginormous bookshelves in the library, and Bruce had to try and get him down without physically climbing up there, because that he knew for sure the shelves couldn't handle.

With this chaos in place, it took Bruce a while to actually have enough time to even think about what had happened that morning. Once he had a moment to himself in the batcave, he sat down, breathed, and almost unconsciously touched his lips.

Immediately, he pulled his fingers away in disgust. He wasn't a love-sick teenager. They were adults. *Clark had really smooth lips*. No! He was an adult. He knew he couldn't avoid Clark, the kids liked him too much, and Bruce valued his friendship too much to let this affect anything. They'd been in too tight quarters for too long, is all. Playing domestic, tucking the kids in, what was he thinking?! Bruce should have stopped all of this when he had the chance, suffered through Cassandra's silence, Jason's tantrum, Dick's pout, all of it.

That way, he never would've had to deal with this. The biological imperative had taken over.

It wasn't like the thought had never crossed his mind. In the beginning, when he was younger, a little more hot-headed, he had

looked at Superman and saw a challenge. He'd looked at Clark Kent the reporter and saw jailbait. When he figured out the two of them were the same, he'd had... thoughts about it. Superman's strength combined with Clark's fumbling tenderness would be an interesting combination. Now he knew better than to risk his friendship with Clark over something so trivial as his own satisfaction.

Bruce's first instinct here was to protect himself and his children, severing contact, changing the locks, the cave access-passes, marking the border of Gotham with red-sun lamps or something. Getting rid of whatever was trying to pry his ribs apart.

However, Bruce was also well aware of the fact that Clark was... A valued ally and friend. If he were to believe Cass' insistence, he was family. One of Bruce's few friends that he could actually spend time with peacefully without either of them being uncomfortable. He was surprisingly reluctant to cut him off, which bothered him to no end. Why? He'd trained himself to manage his emotions and compartmentalize enough that he should be able to, without hesitation, but right now his stomach told him it was wrong, that he shouldn't.

This also annoyed him. How could he trust himself with taking down an out-of-control Superman if he couldn't even cut Clark out of his life? Bruce knew that all of the others on the Justice League thought that he was extreme on that point, even Clark couldn't fully understand Bruce's reasoning there. Too much faith in humanity. Bruce knew better, which Clark also knew, and he also knew about how good Bruce was at cutting people off. If Bruce didn't mean to cut the other man out of his life, he needed to act, and soon.

But if he didn't want him cut off, where did he want him?

Still as a friend of course. His fingers flew back up to his mouth, and Bruce growled, but let himself press the back of his hand against his lips, like a phantom impression of Clark's lips on his. He'd been surprised, yes, but it had been a while since he'd actually kissed anyone without the intention being sexual. This had been a peck, instinctual and without any ulterior motive. It was... Nice, admittedly. Warm. Sweet. Not like the other kisses he'd had lately.

Shaking his head at himself, Bruce decided that it was all about the close quarters. It wasn't Clark's fault, just the proximity, and Clark wasn't to be blamed for that. Probably repeating patterns he'd seen his parents act out, and nothing more. Really, Bruce couldn't blame him.

They could move on from this.

He decided a text would be sufficient to prove that their friendship wasn't ruined, and pulled out his phone from his pocket.

We're having a talk when you get home, Bruce wrote, and then froze. *Home*. Home? Since when did Clark live in the mansion?

We're having a talk when you get off from work tonight, Bruce wrote instead, and sent it before he could psychoanalyze himself further. He rubbed at his forehead and found he was quite annoyed with the headache beginning to bloom at his temples.

"I do hope you don't go too hard on the lad, Sir. He's a good man," Alfred said pointedly as he put down a cup of tea next to him on the panel. Bruce wasn't all that surprised that he hadn't heard him, but he still had to restrain his startle. He'd probably fixed Dick up while Bruce had been pondering.

"Do you have something to say, Alfred?" he asked incredulously.

"Me? Why goodness no, Master Bruce. It wouldn't be right for me to try and steer your choices," Alfred said in a deadpan.

"Which implies you already know the outcome. Why should I want to date Clark?" Bruce asked suspiciously, and the butler stared at him for a moment in silent surprise.

"Master Clark is the only person you have allowed to come close to you since the unfortunate mess with Master Damian's mother," he stated slowly. "He adores your children, makes you take care of yourself, and cares for you as well. You can be both Batman and Bruce with him, and can be peaceful as well as challenged by him. Pardon me, Master Bruce, but I won't be here forever. I would like to go knowing you're in hands capable of handling you."

"Selina could handle me," Bruce protested, even though he hadn't spoken to her in almost two months, and from the look on Alfred's face, he could tell.

"Oh yes, but she wouldn't enjoy it one bit, and I doubt you would either. All lights and camera, but no action with the two of you. And you'd be morally conflicted all throughout your life, Sir. That's not what anyone would want for you."

Bruce thought about that for a moment. Sure, Clark was attractive.

Stupidly so, actually. Even when he was wearing ill-fitting, garish suits, he was still good-looking. He was gentle and an idiot, and still quite capable, however foolish he was sometimes. His wrinkled nose, the little shake he did with his hand when he ran it through his hair to make the spit-curl blend in further, his hands around a coffee-mug, his laugh, his stupid humor. All... perfectly alright features that one might find attractive.

But it just didn't make *sense*.

"Why would he want *me*?" Bruce asked after a moment of hesitation, and Alfred gave him a slight raise of the eyebrows.

"Why, Master Bruce, I'm rather relieved this isn't a matter of you becoming unobservant," he said, laying a firm, reassuring hand on Bruce's shoulder. The same hand that had guided him out of the GCPD at age nine, the same hand that had brought him to his feet more than once, the hand that made his food, made his armor, kept him alive in all ways possible.

"It just doesn't make sense! I push him away every time I can, and-" Bruce began, fully ready to list all 16 reasons he could come up with off the top of his head why Clark shouldn't even statistically speaking *like* him, when he was interrupted and pushed back into his chair.

"That's simply not true, chap," Alfred said, his voice exasperated and gentle as Bruce buried his head in his hands, trying inefficently to get away from the gentle words. "You check up on his mother, for goodness sake. You only attempt to repell him is with words, and the boy's always back for more with a new suit of tough skin. He's been your friend for long enough that all of your children know him as a valued friend of yours, and you haven't managed to scare him off with your various crazy ideas for as long as you've known him. Frankly, Master Bruce, it's not a weakness to have someone to bare yourself to. Master Clark should be your someone."

"Well who says I need to do that?" Bruce said angrily, pulling on his hair.

"General health physicians and psychiatrists, but you've never listened to them before, so now it is I, Sir," Alfred said firmly.

"And you think you know everything about me, don't you?" Bruce said, pulling his shoulder away from the reassuring warmth and putting up all defenses. Who was Alfred to tell him these things?

"I diapered your bottom. I bloody well ought to!" Alfred announced, his voice rising just enough to make Bruce's shoulders automatically hunch a little in shame. After a moment of silence, the butler tacked on a very obviously relucant "Sir."

When Bruce opened his mouth to retort, Alfred held a placating hand up.

"Please, Master Bruce. Give this an honest chance. Tell me without even a bit of hesitancy that this is a horrible idea that could never go right, ever, and that you would hate it, and I shall let it go. But if there's even a sliver of a chance this might make you happy... promise me to take it."

Bruce pursed his lips, and crossed his arms. Alfred grabbed an empty cup standing on the panel, probably left over from Stephanie's stake-out last night by the monitors, and sighed very quietly.

"How's Dick's head?" Bruce asked silently.

"Master Richard's gash has been taped up. If it had been any deeper, it might have required stitches. Miss Cassandra also claims she feels fine, and I've analyzed her test results. It seems she's narrowly escaped an inflammation in the brain, since we gave her serums and antidotes so early. However, I don't advise we move her upstairs again just yet," Alfred reported dutifully.

"I agree," Bruce muttered. "Maybe get her the blankets from her room? And something else to sleep in. Apparently the cave is ookey-spookey."

"Hm. I find I agree with that assessment, but I assume that was what you were going for, Sir?"

"Hmmm," Bruce grunted, and Alfred gave a nod of acquiescence.

"Do come up for dinner later when it's ready. It would be too bad if you'd sit around in your cave when you could do better for yourself, Master Bruce," he said pointedly, and then walked up the stairs with the cup still in hand.

"I'm not in the cave too much," Bruce said defensively, but Alfred was definitely ignoring him. Annoyed, the billionaire sank back into his chair, placing his hands on the panel, fingers spread.

Having Clark's help these past two weeks had been appreciated, but

these were special circumstances. What would happen when there were no longer any children to distract them? They did work together well in the field, and Bruce did enjoy his company more than most others. But of course, those criteria could also be applied to Diana, so that didn't sound like a sound basis on which to base his assumptions.

I honestly don't know how someone as smart as you can be so damn dumb, Bruce, Jason had said.

Because you totally are together! Except you don't kiss. Yet, Dick had said.

'Cos you are, Tim had said.

Could have bloody well fooled me, Sir, Alfred had said.

What did Clark have that Diana, gorgeous, funny, fierce Diana, didn't?

Lois was truly ruthless during the interview, wringing the answers out of the poor PR-man, whilst Jimmy dutifully took pictures of his sweaty face. Clark got a text from Bruce about how they needed to talk, and immediately began sweating as well. At least he wasn't being cut off without hesitation. One step wrong now, though, and Bruce's defenses would probably shoot up, and Clark would never get to see his face out of the cowl again.

He texted an 'okay' back, changing it at least seven times before deciding that would be best. Lois reassured him after the interview that this was good, he wasn't being shunned, and he'd replied!

They returned to the Daily Planet about an hour before lunch, and Clark grabbed some coffee and an apple from the break room, and went over to his computer to squeeze in some Justice League paperwork before lunch.

They'd only been back for maybe half an hour when the buzz of the bullpen hushed for only a few seconds. Normally that would be just a little odd, but combined with the fact that there was also the sound of heads turning, and papers being fumbled with, Clark furrowed his eyebrows, not sure what would ellicit that sort of response. He peeked over the top of his cubicle wall, and saw a familiar mane of hair and broad shoulders over by the elevators.

"Diana! What are you doing here?" he asked incredulously, stepping out of his cubicle. Every ear in the office was definitely aimed in their direction, trying to catch what they were saying. As soon as Diana's searching eyes found him, she smiled, and walked towards him.

She was wearing a light-blue bomberjacket over a white blouse, and nice, dark jeans, and looked no less radiant than she did in her Wonder Woman getup.

"Clark," she smiled, giving him a quick hug. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" he asked in confusion.

"Our lunch," Diana said. When Clark still gaped like a confused fish, she crossed her arms over her chest, and gave him an annoyed look. "We made the plans yesterday, Kal."

A lightbulb was flicked on in his brain.

"Oh! Yes! We did," he fumbled, and Diana looked at him in that amused 'oh humans' way she had a tendency of doing a lot. "I'm sorry, it's been... A hectic morning, I totally forgot."

"How does Kent always get the good-looking chicks, anyway?" Clark heard a sports-reporter mutter to his cubicle-mate, and he shook his head a little to refocus his hearing. Diana, too, glanced around at that, but smirked at him.

"Oh? Still in the manor then? Or just work?" she inquired, dragging him back to his cubicle. Clark sat down, rubbing at his forehead a little, and she leaned back against his desk.

"Yeah, in the manor. The kids woke us up by running on our bed and trying to toss batarangs at each other."

"Are they allowed in the cave?" she asked incredulously.

"No," Clark replied, cracking a grin before taking a bite out of his apple. Diana grinned back.

"They're devious. So, have you had sex yet?" she asked casually, and Clark sputtered, nearly choking on the apple in his mouth. Diana gave his back a solid thwack that nearly tossed him out of his chair, and he managed to swallow it.

"Jesus, *Diana*!"

"It's a valid question. If I'd have known the only way to get you in the same bed would be to make his children small, I would've found a magican and done it years ago," she said, no remorse or hesitation. Clark fiddled with his glasses a little, and she raised an eyebrow at him in encouragement.

"I mean... No, we haven't... I-I kissed him this morning, but it was totally on accident and I don't know what possessed me to do it," he hurriedly got out, and Diana's other eyebrow flew up as well.

"Really? I can't believe it! Wow, that's great, Kal! Finally someone taking an initiative," she beamed at him. "I'm proud of you. What did he say?"

"I flew away," he said, and the beaming turned into a groan of exhaustion.

"I can't *believe* you! Now, finally, when you get to it, and you don't even talk about it?"

"I was in a hurry, and I didn't even realize it happened until I was outside!" Clark muttered defensively, and Diana rolled her eyes.

"Man confuses me," she said, entirely annoyed. There was the slam of Perry's door hitting the wall behind it as the man stomped out of his office. The donuts in the break room had been replaced with apples after a health initiative, and Perry had been in a pissy mood about it for a day or two. Therefore, Clark was pretty prepared for his name being yelled over the bullpen.

"Kent!" Perry shouted. "Are you just sitting on your ass, doing nothing worth paying for, again?"

Diana immediately got up, a fierce look on her face that told Clark just what she thought about Perry, and he quickly pulled her back down.

"Just talking to a source, Mr. White," he called back. "And you generally have to sit on your ass to write something worth publishing."

Perry grumbled, but walked around the bullpen over to the sports-reporters, getting the gist from them.

"Geeze, what's got his mustache in a twist?" Lois asked incredulously, following him around the room with her eyes and walking into Clark's cubicle. It was sort of squished with one kryptonian and one amazon

taking up a lot of space with muscle alone, and when Lois squeezed in, Clark couldn't even swivel his chair. "Is it still the donuts?"

"Unless someone's done something else stupid since the day before yesterday, yeah, it's still the donuts," Clark sighed. Lois glanced at Diana, who looked back, a liking smirk on her face. Oh boy.

"Hi Diana. How are you?" she asked sweetly.

"I'm alright, thank you. Anybody in the office giving you any trouble?" Diana asked just as sweetly back.

"What happened to getting lunch?" Clark asked a little desperately, noticing the look in both of their eyes. It spelled trouble, that's what it did.

"Lucky for these goons, no, but Kathy's been getting sweet-talked by one of the coffeeshop guys who keeps writing his number on her cups, and following her down through the parking structure when she says no," Lois said, and Clark frowned.

"Hey, what? Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. Lois waved him off.

"Big Blue might make him pee his pants like a fanboy, but Wonder Woman will make him pee himself for all different reasons," she said with a smirk, and Diana rose to her full, slightly intimidating height, and crossed her arms.

"I say we pay this guy a visit, Lois. Show me his face and he will never bother a woman without her explicit consent again," she said, sounding more like the true icon and legend that was Wonder Woman, and Clark saw Lois fall back against his not so sturdy wall in mild surprise. People always tended to forget that there was a difference between the superhero and the person behind the cape or the mask.

"Follow me, Princess," Lois said with a slight smile, stepping out of his cubicle. Diana followed, and they walked a ways down the hallway before Diana held a finger up, turned around, and leaned against the top of Clark's cubicle-wall.

"Would it be alright for Lois to join our lunch?" she asked, and Clark nodded helplessly. Diana smiled at him, gave him a pat on the cheek.

"Of course. I'll bring her jacket down to the lobby," he agreed. "What are we feeling up for?"

"Can I convince you to go to Paris?" she inquired, keeping her voice down. Clark raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Uh, what's there?"

"Amazing crêpes, is what is there," she said without hesitation. "I found a special restaurant where they offer various fruits I doubt you've ever tasted on their crepes, and also meat, if you're interested."

"Lunches out with you are always so fascinating," Clark said thoughtfully, and Diana grinned, slipping away from the wall and walking back towards Lois.

"J'onn is meeting us there in half an hour, so better save and get a move on," Diana called, before disappearing into the elevator with Clark's friend.

Clark saved the document, shut his and Lois' computer down, and grabbed their jackets and keys and phones and cash. It was his turn to pay for Lois' lunch anyway. After that was done, he took the elevator down to the lobby and waited patiently for Diana and Lois to come back from wherever they were.

When they finally reappeared, Lois was looking at Diana with surprising awe, and Diana had that little squint she wore when she felt she'd done justice, and Clark just handed Lois her jacket, preferring not to know. Lois had seen enough in her life that it was hard to impress her. Diana was a hero, so of course she hadn't injured the man grievously, but Clark seriously doubted he'd be bothering Kathy any time soon.

"So, you said crêpes?" Clark said when they were standing in an alley, and spun into his Superman suit. Diana nodded, pulling her hair out of it's bun and placing her tiara on her head. Lois hummed appreciatively, whether from the mention of good food or Diana, Clark was unsure. "Lead the way."

Diana smirked, and leaped into the air. Clark lifted Lois into a bridal carry, which she sighed loudly at, but grudgingly accepted out of respect for the crêpes, and then they took off into the bright summer sky.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp! Lots of thinking, not a lot of talking in this chapter. I'm trying to be deep and root around in how these characters work. Let me know how you think I'm doing!
Also the 'i diapered your bottom' thing, I thought was from the batman the animated series but it was instead from the animated movie Mask of the Phantasm! Just felt like I needed to give credit where it was due (pls don't sue me DC i have no money). Awesome line delivered by Alfred canonically and also very appropriate for this situation.
Also also, one of my personal favorite headcanons is that Diana could probably yeet Clark like a fucking baseball if she had a good enough grip on him (hence why she can slap him on the back and make him stumble), and I'm pretty sure she's canonically stronger than him in a couple of comics, so It could be real? You never know??
Thank you so much for the explosive response to the last chapter! If I had known that's what it would take to all of you to interact, I would have tossed you around a bit more. Thanks, anyway!!! You make me so happy!! <3<3<3

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce was suspicously undisturbed after lunch, which he found unusual, but was probably Alfred's doing. He knew he needed time to think. He'd made a very very long list of pros and cons of him and Clark becoming... Involved in a relationship. Dick had decided he was fine and gone upstairs on his own a while ago, and now Bruce was just sitting and staring at one of Stephanie's reports, not really seeing the words and thinking. Just thinking.

Finally, he shook his head, and stood up, stretching a bit. Dinner time had passed, which he'd eaten down here with Cassandra a few hours ago. From the look on Alfred's face when he'd called for dinner, Clark had been there, so Bruce took the opportunity to spend some time with the recovering Cassandra. Alfred had been disapproving, but let him. Clark'd been eating with them for long enough that he'd feel odd not talking to him over the boys' chatter, smiling privately at the silly things the kids sometimes blurted out. Also a clue that Bruce should have noticed before: that they were getting too used to each other and too comfortable.

Before he went upstairs, he decided he'd check in on Cassandra again. Not to avoid going upstairs and seeing Clark, of course not, that would be ridiculous. Bruce was more mature than that. Besides, since Clark was here, Alfred wouldn't be needing a trade-off, but it was almost bedtime. He needed to be there for the boys, so he'd check how Cassandra was doing now and say goodnight so he could tell Alfred if she needed something for the night, and then stay upstairs.

Sweeping the curtains aside, Bruce saw his daughter already looking at him, a minimal frown on her face. She had her knees to her chest and was curled up into a little ball, her computer on the bed indicating she'd been watching something before he came in. The IV that was in her arm disappeared underneath her butter-yellow duvet, which she had practically disappeared under. There was a grey hood covering her head too, which lead Bruce to believe that Alfred had indeed given her something else to sleep in after dinner.

"Hi. How are you feeling?" he asked, sitting down on the chair by her bedside.

"Fine," she said, giving him a thoughtful look with the frown still on her face.

"What's the frown about, then? Anything I can get for you?" he asked, because Cass' face was practically always neutral when she wasn't trying to participate in conversation. She wasn't a regular frowner, like Damian, but she wasn't a regular smiler either, like Dick. Usually neutral, was his point, and that wasn't neutral.

Cassandra bit her lip, and sat up on the bed, creeping out of the covers, much to Bruce's confusion. The hoodie she was wearing was a Gotham Knights one, and judging from the size, probably one of his. She cradled his face in her hands, and made sure they had eye contact before she even opened her mouth.

"Talked to Steph. Know what I want to say about Clark now," she explained. "Steph advises I do this, so you listen." Bruce chuckled a little.

"You don't need to, I can hear you."

"No. You don't," Cassandra said, not sounding annoyed like last time, but calm, her voice even. There was a steel-resolve in her brown eyes, and she would not let him look away from her, even for a moment. "You love him. He loves you. I see, with your bodies. You move. Always closer to Clark than anyone else. Always reaching hand out for something. Take it. Take him. You say I deserve to be happy, even after what I've done. So do you. So do *you*." Her eyes were glistening a little, and Bruce felt his own throat go a little tight.

"Cassandra-" he began slowly, and she cut him off.

"You deserve to be happy, you just don't believe. Let Clark make you happy. Let you make him happy," she whispered. Probably a few of the longer sentences she'd bothered to string together lately. Bruce felt her effort in communicating with him like a punch in the gut.

"You think we'd be happy?" he finally asked slowly, and Cassandra stroked a thumb over one of his eyebrows, still not breaking eye-contact.

"Yes," she said, no hesitation.

"I've been making a list and I've... been thinking in that same, general direction," he said slowly. Cassandra lit up, a smile on her face.

"So you will?" she asked, looking a little excited.

"Might not be the best time," Bruce hedged, and Cassandra's smile turned into a roll of the eyes, and she groaned and fell back on the covers again in frustration. "Stop worrying about this, okay? You're still not back to your full strength."

"Stupid-head," she muttered, and pulled her hood up again, crawling back under the covers and hiding from him. When he tucked her into a little ball, he noticed that the movie she was watching was Lilo and Stitch, which explained the childish insult. Bruce un-paused the movie for her, dropped a kiss on her hoodie-covered head, and got a wiggle of her toes when he caught them underneath the covers as he tucked her in further, so she was obviously just frustrated with him again.

Before he could go upstairs, he recieved a Leauge email, stating that Diana, Clark, and J'onn had made progress on figuring out how to handle a few in-leauge problems going on with the junior members. He sat down in front of the computerpanel to read it just as there was the sound of something shooting sparks behind him.

"Hey B," came Zatanna's sultry voice. Bruce spun his chair around, and there she was, smiling at him gently, tophead at an angle on her head.

"Where have you been?" Bruce demanded, and Zatanna took her hat off and twirled it a little, shrugging.

"Here and there. Heard you got magical trouble."

"Then you heard right," he replied, and she smirked at him.

"You've always got *some* trouble, Bruce. What can I do ya for this time?"

"My sons have been turned into children." Zatanna snorted.

"Really? Now *that* I'd like to see. You've handled them alone since they turned?"

"No. Superman has been helping out."

"With the kids? He's helping you with *the kids*?" she asked him

incredulously. "He wouldn't touch Kon with a ten foot pole when he first came around!"

"I'm well aware. We've had several talks about it," Bruce droned, and Zatanna pursed her lips.

"Alright. Well, who was it that turned them?"

"I only know it was magic. Not who. Came like a flash of light out of nowhere. Red Robin was mid-swing. It was only a coincidence that Red Hood was there with me, and had Batgirl stayed there for just a few moments, she would've been young too. All of them shed nine years in a wink. I'll call them down here."

"No, no. I want to see them in their natural habitat. Did they ruin any rooms yet?" she asked with a sort of shark-grin, and Bruce sighed as they walked up the stairs.

"Not yet. Jason has however nearly broken my arm, and reread some childhood favorites with me, Tim's oddly demanding and bossy, Damian likes his dog and Clark more than he likes me, and Dick is... So sweet. I'd forgotten that." Zatanna laughed as they emerged from the clock and started walking towards the noise.

"Parents tend to do that sort of thing," she agreed with a wry smile. "You could use some of Dick's sunshine though. And Jason's bark without quite so much bite. And I'm sure Damian is an absolute joy to be around now that he doesn't have the linguistic skills to deep-fry people."

"He learned to say 'ass' in English pretty quick," Bruce replied woefully. Zatannas grin was cruelly happy. "That and 'no' are his favorite words right now, due to a lack of better curses. Sadly, 'fuck' has recently made it's way into his vocabulary."

"What about Jason?" Zatanna snickered.

"Has accepted that cussing comes with consequences, and still does it when he feels it's called for." She rolled her eyes, and grinned.

"Sounds about right," she said as they walked down the stairs and into the sitting room closest to the kitchen.

"Wow, leg," was the first thing Jason said as they stepped into the room, and then started blushing. Bruce and Clark met eyes over the room, and both quickly looked instead at the various children.

Clark was on the floor with Damian between his legs drawing and Dick laying on his stomach in front of Damian, drawing as well, with Titus resting with his head on his thigh. Tim was in Kon's lap, who was sitting in one of the loveseats, Jason on the couch behind Clark's head reading, whilst simultaneously foot-fighting with Roy on the other side of the couch.

"Smooth, egghead," Tim said, tipping his head back to look at Jason upside down, and was whacked over the side of the head in retaliation.

"Hey!" Kon snapped, kissing Tim's head soothingly, at the same time as Clark said 'Jason' in his particularly stern tone. "You okay, sweetheart?"

"Yeah," Tim said, big eyes wet. Jason rolled his eyes very dramatically as Kon kissed Tim's head again. Damian's crayon snapped in half when he tried to press it against the paper with his whole hand, and the toddler blinked at it in surprise for a moment.

"Fuck!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, and everyone startled as Jason began laughing his ass off. Roy was quick to follow, as Clark immediately scolded Damian for saying that.

"Oh boy," Zatanna said, shark-grin now a mile wide. Everyone now looked up at her, and Roy grinned.

"Sup Z," he offered, and she winked at him.

"Line up for Zatanna so she can look at you," Bruce asked nicely, and Tim rolled his eyes but crawled out of Kon's lap, and Jason too reluctantly put his book down and batted Roy's legs off before standing up in front of them.

"Hey, Zatanna!" Dick said happily, bouncing up onto his feet to rush over to her, and she tilted her head at him.

"How have you done?" she asked.

"Pretty good," Dick replied, hugging her around the waist, and she petted his head.

"Alright," she agreed. "I can sense the magic that's been put on them. Very deep and old. It does take a certain amount of skill to align them all at the same scale. How long have they been like this?"

"Sixteen days," Bruce said, eyes narrowing as he watched the smile Dick kept giving her. Something was weird about it, but Bruce hadn't seen young Dick's face in a couple of years before this, and he couldn't quite place it.

"Alright," she said, scanning each face for a moment. "You're all adorable. Please tell me someone's taken pictures?"

"Enough to fill a photoalbum, Miss Zatara," Alfred relayed as he appeared in the doorway, and Zatanna smirked again. Clark had just managed to convince Titus to move off his leg and picked up Damian and one of his balls, and stood up to greet them.

"Good. I think Damian will just about combust if I get them back to the right ages again."

"*If* ?" Clark said, eyes wide as he bounced Damian on his hip distantly. Zatanna shrugged.

"You got a more exact time than sixteen days?" she asked, grabbing Jason's cheek with a grin. He looked up at her, wide-eyed and looking a little embarrassed.

"Sixteen days, 17 hours, twenty-eight minutes, give or take," Bruce replied, quickly doing the math in his head. Should be right. Zatanna nodded.

"Yeah. Keep track of that for me. I'll be back tomorrow. Gotta do some thinking." She let go of Jason's cheek and took a step back. "Emoh em ekat!"

In a flurry of sparks, Zatanna was gone, and Bruce raised his eyebrows at his oldest son.

"What was that about?" he asked, and Dick looked up at him innocently.

"What, B?"

"That odd little smile?" he clarified.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Bruce," Dick said, stealing Damian from Clark's arms. "C'mon guys, let's go to the game room!"

"Dibs on the Xbox," Kon said, hopping out of his chair and heaving Tim up on his back as he went. Jason dragged Roy up on his feet,

saying something about foosball, and then only Clark and Bruce were left in the room.

Immediately both looked anywhere but at each other, and when Bruce finally bit the bullet and opened his mouth, Clark did too.

"Look, I'm sor-"

"We need to-"

Both cut themselves off, and Clark shoved his glasses up on his nose further, looking rather awkward. Bruce sighed, before looking around the room. Right. This wasn't the prime place for this conversation.

"Cave. Now," he commanded, and Clark grabbed Bruce before he really registered it himself, flying them into the cave. He'd learned to react to Bruce's commanding voice, since it was usually a matter of life and death. Once in the cave, the other man practically shoved Clark off of himself, and took a step back.

"This morning was a mistake. We've obviously been in too tight quarters for too long, with children involved. It can happen to anybody. I suggest you move back to Metropolis. Zatanna will be able to fix them tomorrow. Thank you for helping me out," Bruce said, forcing every word out like bullets and turning around to look at the monitor, clicking up windows holding reports and files. Clark winced.

"Bruce..."

"What?" he asked curtly. That made the reporter frown instead, and he subconsciously widened his stance, putting his hands on his hips.

"Would you at least look at me when you're kicking me out?" Clark asked a little exasperatedly. Bruce still didn't turn, and Clark felt his stomach flip as he gathered courage. "Is it because you liked the kiss that you won't look at me?"

Bruce's arms tensed, and he whipped around.

"It was foolish and you didn't know what you were doing," he said firmly, like he was trying to convince Clark to drop it, convince him that that was the truth. That sort of bugged Clark. It was proof that Bruce knew exactly why Clark had kissed him, and yet wouldn't admit it. It made Clark a little bold, seeing that look on Bruce's face.

Junior members of the league had no idea how Superman dared to

defy Batman, not when he looked so menacing all the time and could probably kill all of them in their sleep. The answer was simple: both of them were too proud and too stubborn. They pushed each other to new heights. Sometimes of greatness, sometimes of stupidity. Clark didn't really know which one it was this time, yet.

"*Didn't know what I was doing*? Yeah I did, admittedly a bit later, but yeah, I did know what I was doing. I kissed you because I wanted to. Because I've been *wanting* to."

Bruce's eyes were surprisingly wide, and when Clark stepped closer to have a normal conversation with him, the Batman, usually so full of grace, backed right into the computer panel, making the screen go dark and cursing as he slammed his hand into a particularly sharp switch on the panel.

"Alright, B?" Clark asked worriedly, hurriedly coming closer to grasp his hand. Bruce was a little too stunned to move away from him, which meant he was trapped between a worried Superman and the computer. Clark honestly *wanted* him? Sure, he'd noticed Clark was simultaneously calmer and more nervous around him, and yeah, he'd heard from several separate sources that Clark and he looked like they'd make an amazing couple, from his children that they made... "moon-eyes", from Alfred that...

Oh, boy.

"I'm fine. Get out of my house," Bruce said firmly, looking up at Clark. The reporter was still holding onto his hand, but Bruce wasn't noticing, which shocked the other man. But it also gave him hope.

"What happened to having a talk?"

"We talked."

"You talked. I haven't said anything."

"You're talking right now," Bruce said, knowing that in his panic he'd sounded petty and like a child. From the look on Clark's face, he'd noticed.

"You've been spending too much time listening to Jason and Tim argue," Clark chuckled, and now Bruce remembered the hand, pulling it out of the other man's grasp.

"We're still friends, and allies. What more do you want?" Bruce

growled, and slipped out from being pressed between the panel and Clark. When he tried to leave, however, Clark supersped his way around to face him.

"If you would just listen to me," he nearly begged, holding Bruce's shoulders firmly. "Then we could talk about it, and I could tell you exactly what more I want."

"Let go of me," Bruce said lowly, meeting Clark's eyes with a biting expression. Clark responded with an exasperated look. *He returns with thicker skin*. Had Bruce's glare really lost all of it's bite on him? Of course, Bruce could, if he wanted to, get out of Clark's grip. He wasn't holding him that hard. A nice smack around both ears to disorient him, and a kick to the stomach to dislodge him if he resisted. However, that insistent tug in his stomach that wouldn't let him leave Clark out in the cold pulled again, and Bruce sort of froze.

"Bruce, quit it. Even your kids, the smaller version, see it. Why won't you admit it? What happened to being the world's greatest detective?"

Bruce stared at him in silence, his heart beating a little harder, a little faster. Why did Clark make him freeze? How could he have not noticed that?

"See what?" he asked Clark, his voice, his posture, every signal a warning. He met Clark's eyes and glared, but Clark swallowed and stared back, his look soft.

"Us. This. How good it feels, just acting like a couple."

Bruce resented that notion, but he knew exactly what Clark was talking about. Even now, being restrained against his will, he could acknowledge that Clark's grip on his shoulders didn't make him want to tear himself away and punch his teeth in. Mainly, it felt like an... odd sort of comfort. He wasn't being restrained, he was being held. Those two words had different meanings to Bruce, as he'd been retstrained many times.

He just felt like he needed to spare Clark. Spare him from the hurricane of grief and trouble and lost composure that he was. Bruce would just ruin him, ruin the symbol of hope, the Man of Steel, and the world would suffer from it, and Talia would be right. He couldn't touch anything without it burning, couldn't even make his children stay, couldn't keep his family together, how was he supposed to keep him and Clark together? They shouldn't be friends in the first place, Clark would be safer then, safe from him.

Of course, if he said this out loud, Clark would never leave him alone, trying to prove something to him and becoming unhappy just to prove it to him, so Bruce decided to use words that wouldn't make any room for argument.

"I don't do relationships well," Bruce said very plainly. The billionaire crossed his arms over his chest, a gesture he immediately hated himself for succumbing to, but Clark was focused on his face, and not his body. Bruce took the comfort it provided to squeeze his still slightly sore ribs.

"What do you mean?" Clark asked, relieved when Bruce didn't seem to be running away from the conversation anymore. Now he looked sort of resigned and sad instead, which wasn't really all that much better. Bruce was still just sort of shocked Clark had made wiggle-room for argument.

"I mean, I don't do well in relationships. They always leave. I don't give them enough attention, or enough love, or enough anything, apparently," Bruce said, his face pointedly blank. "It comes back to bite me in the ass. Always. Relationships are not conductive to my sanity." *I'd ruin you. Don't let me.*

"Are you thinking about Talia?" Clark asked a little tenatively, the woman at the forefront of his mind when it came to Bruce's partners. He knew he'd also been together with Catwoman, and some socialite girls as Brucie Wayne. At the mention of her name, Bruce made a face like he was sucking on a lemon, pressing his lips together firmly.

"Talia... was a mistake," he said slowly.

"Is this all Talia's fault? You not thinking you can love people enough?" Clark asked, and Bruce shook his head.

"No, not... not exactly. She proved that it's a terrible idea. Lovi- wanting someone like that. It leads to irresponsible actions and unforeseen consequences."

"You think I'm going to steal your DNA and make a child to further my crime imperium?" Clark joked, trying to lighten up the situation. Bruce's look was blank. "Wow. Seriously? Talia really screwed you up, huh?"

"Well I can't say she made me *less* paranoid," Bruce snapped back. Clark was still holding his shoulders firmly, except now his thumbs were rubbing soothing circles into his biceps.

"Bruce... I just want to be with you. Okay? I don't want your money, or fame, or anything like that. Just... You. You're enough for me. You are... More than enough for me." Bruce's eyebrows furrowed.

"Why do you always do this, Kal?" he asked Clark incredulously.

"Do what?" Clark asked just as incredulously, a small smile spreading on his lips as his one hand moved around to rub against Bruce's tense back, pulling them closer together. *You move. Always closer to Clark than anyone else.*

"*That*," Bruce said accusingly, pulling away. "Try to put me at ease like that."

"I've known you for what feels like forever. After spending close to eleven years in your company, I'd like to think I've picked up at least something. Enough to... To fall in love with you," Clark forced himself to say, even though he was so nervous it felt like his heart was beating as fast as a hummingbird's.

Bruce frowned at him.

"*Why*?" he asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are you... in love with me, Clark?" Bruce asked. Clark laughed sadly when Bruce's answer was so depressingly predictable, and reached out for his hand, trying to pull him back in. He wasn't about to let him off the hook now. When Bruce wouldn't budge, Clark came to him instead.

"*Why*? Why shouldn't I be? You're... Generous, sweet, caring, gentle. One of the best men I've ever met." When Bruce still looked skeptical, Clark rolled his eyes heavenward. "Bruce, do you know who calls my Ma?" When Bruce raised an eyebrow, not seeing the significance, Clark smiled gently at him. "Three out of four peole who do are in this building, right now. You, me, and Kon, and Kara. You offer to pay for fixing essentially anything that breaks on the farm. You care about your kids and your family, so, so much. You're also obsessive, and paranoid, and probably the most stubborn person on this green earth. And I'm in love with you."

"That's... Missguided," Bruce said, but he felt hot and cold all over. Clark's smile was too close and too far away at the same time, and this, *this* is why Bruce despises not having full control over his

feelings. This uncontrollable fear and physical reaction to having his world shaken like a little snowglobe. But... It didn't feel... Bad, exactly.

It wasn't like with Selina, where they'd been going off like firecrackers until they couldn't contain themselves, or like with Talia, the exiting heat that came from knowing she was practically danger personified and being at her mercy. No, it was fonder, like sinking into a warm bath and letting your exhausted muscles relax, and Bruce honestly hadn't realized how far he'd pushed down that little tug in his stomach until it was practically stomped out. And yet, here it was again, back with a vengeance, telling him to wrap himself up in Clark's arms and never leave.

Clark stared into Bruce's sharp blue eyes, holding his breath and watching the gears turning, feeling like his world was on a knife's edge. Slowly, Bruce came closer, inch by inch, and placed his hands on Clark's shoulders, firm and strong. Shit. *Shit.*

The reporter's hands gently landed on his hips, ready to pull away any moment, which also wasn't helping Bruce at all. He stared into Clark's bright blue eyes, through the glasses. That really annoyed him, so he grabbed the glasses off Clark's face and shoved them into the pocket of his jeans. Clark chuckled.

"Don't laugh at me," Bruce said, but it didn't come out as a growl, like he wanted it to, but more fond and on the edge of vulnerable. He found it hard to keep himself distanced from Clark when he had those eyes on him, that smile directed at him.

That Clark looked happy and vulnerable and with an added pinch of Kansas-sweetness didn't make it any easier. That they were pressed up against each other, like that one time they were stuck on an arctic planet with useless comms, didn't make it any easier. Bruce reflected on all the times Clark had rescued him, the times he had rescued Clark, and felt warm on the inside, like he hadn't learned anything about controlling his emotions in all of his years as Batman.

"I'm not," Clark promised. "You really don't like my glasses, do you?"

"What?"

"You always do that when I wear my glasses around you and we're not in public."

"No I don't."

"Yeah, you do. I'll be sure to skip them when I come over."

"Who says you get to come over?" Bruce asked him challengingly, and Clark smiled crookedly, rising to meet it. God, why did he always have to rise to meet him? Bruce felt a hot pang of fondness that exceeded the limits of any platonic relationship he'd ever had, and Clark looked up at the ceiling in thought as he supposedly counted, and Bruce couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Well, your butler, for one," he began with saying, but he didn't get to continue his long list. Before he knew it, there was a glint in Bruce's eyes, and Clark's face was grabbed and their mouths crashed together in a slightly desperate kiss.

Clark felt like he was soaring on the inside when he managed to coax Bruce back from the brink of desperation and instead made the kiss deep, warm, and breathtaking, his one arm wrapped tightly around the billionaire's waist and the other cupping his strong jaw. When they pulled back for air, Bruce's lips quirked into that half-smirk that was really too much for him to handle right at this moment.

"Get us back on the ground, or I'm jumping," Bruce said very calmly, but his arms were wrapped around Clark's shoulders and he was sort of standing on Clark's feet, and wow, they were so high up they were almost touching the ceiling and disturbing the bats.

Clark laughed again, enjoying the feel of Bruce pressed tightly against him and feeling light and wonderful and oh... Yeah, he is *so* in love with this guy.

"Are you sure? You don't look ready to swan-dive," he grinned, and Bruce smirked secretively, only for Clark. He couldn't stop himself from spinning a lap in the air at the look of it and what it lit up inside of him, and Bruce felt that tug in his stomach feed greedily off of Clark's sunshine and that amazing, loving smile.

"Okay, now I'm ready to swan-dive," Bruce growled in his ear, and Clark shuddered a little, but did as he was commanded and slowly put them back on the ground.

"One more?" Clark pleaded when Bruce got ready to disentangle himself, and the billonaire bit his lip before leaning in and kissing him smoothly again, practically feeling the happiness radiating from Clark's skin. The warmth grew from Bruce's solar plexus out to the tips of his fingers, and surprisingly, he felt the hairs on his arms start to rise. Which was idiotic, but the warmth was also spreading elsewhere.

Clark really was pressed up against him quite firmly, with their chests and arms rubbing together.

One more turned into two more, turned into Bruce's hand in Clark's hair and Clark wrapping him up tighter in his arms, until that tug in Bruce's stomach was way more insistent, and Clark's breathing was getting a little heavy.

Bruce was just considering how to get them to the closest bed without having to pass any of his kids when they were rudely interrupted.

"I knew it!" Dick shouted victoriously from the top of the stairs. Bruce and Clark detached and turned to look at their audience, Clark nearly pulling away like they'd been caught redhanded. Bruce stopped him. He wasn't ashamed. He was knew that at least fifty percent of his kids weren't straight. This wasn't weird to them. The weird part was seeing their father-figure kiss someone. Clark flushed, but stayed close to him.

"Gross," Jason called, and Tim just nodded to himself, like this made perfect sense now.

"Who told you it's okay to listen in on other people's private conversations?" Bruce called back, and regretted it before it was entirely out of his mouth, as all three gave him a strange look.

"You did!" they said in unison. Clark laughed a little, and his large hand stroked down Bruce's back. Bruce found that he really enjoyed the sensation.

"They've got you there, Bruce," he pointed out, smiling down at him, and Bruce huffed.

"You shut it," he muttered, before raising the volume of his voice to be heard by the little boys in the stairs. "Where did your pet-teenagers go?"

"They went home. Roy was going out tonight, probably," Jason said, sounding decidedly petulant.

"Kon has a test tomorrow," Tim declared. "I told him to study."

"Hopefully he'll listen to Tim. Never listens to me," Clark muttered, and Bruce rolled his eyes, pulling away from Clark to shoot his kids a scrutinizing look.

"Where's Alfred?"

"Nighting Damian," Dick told him, looking very pleased with himself for some reason.

"Steph, then?"

"She doesn't live here. Neither does Barbie," Jason pointed out. "Cass is asleep down here, I guess."

Bruce internally groaned. No way for him and Clark escaping. But they were his kids. They were important to him. And were also hard to get to bed without them sharing his. Maybe he could lock himself and Clark in the study? *No*. Bruce exhaled, and told himself to stop behaving like a randy teenager.

"Then who's watching you?"

"Well, I'm watching Jason, Jason is watching Dick, and Dick is watching me. We figured out a system," Tim announced. That made him snort.

"How's it working out for you?" he asked, and got a shrug from all three at the same time.

"No one's injured yet," Dick said proudly. Bruce smiled at them, his frustrating, smart, mischevious, little boys.

Soon they'd be back to their normal age and size, and Jason would go back to being a distant presense, only dropping in whenever he was about to lose a limb and couldn't patch himself up, and Tim would go back to hating him and using Bruce's dysfunctional methods of coping, and Dick would go back to Bludhaven and to only coming home whenever Damian wanted him to. Dick would leave, and he'd never come back for Bruce, only for Damian, and Damian would go back to being nearly impossible to handle and cold again.

Clark's hand landed on his back, and Bruce took a deep breath, and forced himself to think about *all* the things that had come out of this entire experience, not just the negative things.

Alfred had a photo album filled with all of them now. There was no way Tim was ever going to give up his electric car, and if he did, Dick would undoubtedly hop into and drive it around it whenever he came over. Jason would steal the lasso and the tiara and wear them whenever he was playing with Roy's daughter Lian. The entire fridge

was covered with Damian's drawings, age two. Cassandra had carried baby Damian around and genuinely seemed to enjoy it. Jason's reading preferences were still the same as they had been when he was a little boy. Tim and Kon seemed to have a genuinely good friendship, which made Bruce draw the conclusion that their relationship, too, would be of the same nature.

"Good going, boys. How about some time in the jungle gym before you have to go to bed?" Bruce asked, and got cheers from the children as they dashed down the stairs towards the jungle gym.

"Smooth," Clark said from behind him, stroking his hand down Bruce's back with a smile before he took off into the air to make sure none of Bruce's kids fell.

Right. Whatever happened when his children went back to normal, Bruce would still have Clark to help him. A billion doubts and outcomes spun through his head, most of them terrible, the rest of them worse, but Bruce was always a pessimist. That's why he and Dick had made such a good team in the first place, and why he and Clark had been friends for such a long time. He just needed to listen more to Clark and his bright thoughts than his own dark ones.

He could do that. If anything, he could try that. For Clark. For Alfred.

For himself.

Chapter End Notes

Finally more smooching!! And declarations of love!!
However, our story isn't over yet. We still have small children around that need to grow up!
Next chapter will be at least a week, as I have major tests coming up, and I am StressedTM. But at least you get this sweet chapter to last you until then!!
Thanks for being awesome, I love all of you, I love hearing what you have to say about this, and thank you a ridiculous amount for reading!! <3<3<3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

WARNING MATURE CHAPTER AHEAD
We're getting to that mature bit I was asking about in like... chapter thirteen. I didn't want to change the overall rating of the fic because this is literally the only thing that's mature in this whole story. If you're not here for the smut, that's cool too! Just skip from where Bruce pushes Clark into a bedroom to "Bruce woke up the next morning..."
Also Jason uses the f-slur in this chap, but Bruce puts a stop to it. Just a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time all the children were getting ready to go to bed, Bruce was also sort of exhausted. He had miscalculated how far down he'd pushed the Clark-labeled feelings, and now that he'd let them out into the light, dealt with them, they were making him a little weary. The kids kept him distracted by being finicky by bedtime, with Tim making him read the same chapter of a book to him, sitting in his lap and forcing him to go back all the time and start over. Like he said. Finicky. Bruce was going to miss that when he was back to normal.

Bruce could also tell the moment Alfred found out about him and Clark, because Jason called from his room about Bruce and Clark needing to kiss each other goodnight or he wasn't going to bed at all, and Clark actually went for it, planting one on his cheek. Bruce huffed and peeked into Jason's room, seeing the shit-eating grin on his face.

"Do you want a goodnight-kiss too, Jase?" he asked, and Jason screeched and hid under the covers as Bruce stalked into the room. Alfred blinked slowly, and Clark actually thought the butler looked like he might cry, but instead he just cleared his throat silently as he strode past the blushing Clark. When Bruce ripped the covers away, Jason was giggling and breathy and Bruce felt a happy sort of warmth in his chest. He had so many *freckles*.

Gently, Bruce leaned down, and cupped Jason's little face in his hands, placing a kiss on his forehead, where the white streak would be, if he was at his normal age. Outside, he heard Tim call for Clark to come

read to him.

"There," Bruce said firmly. "Now it's time to tuck in. Teeth brushed, say goodnight to all the others?"

"Yeah," Jason said, batting Bruce's hands off and crawling up on the bed. Bruce retrieved the blankets from the end of the bed, and tucked him in gently.

"Want me to grab a book for you?"

"Emma," Jason sighed as he settled in the covers, and Bruce took the book from the shelf, handing it to the snuggled up Jason.

"You're set?" he asked, and Jason nodded. Bruce sighed a little, and turned around to leave. "Alright. Goodnight."

He was almost out the door when there was a soft call for him.

"Hey, B?" Bruce turned around.

"Yes, Jason?" The teal eyes watching him from the bed were wary, maybe a little scared. That wasn't good.

"'S the reason why you don't think fags are bad is 'cos you're one?" came the quick whisper, and Bruce frowned.

"Don't say fag, Jason," he scolded, and stepped back into the room, sitting down on the boy's bed gently. "It's rude and disrespectful to people who are gay. The reason I don't think being gay is bad isn't because I'm gay, because I'm not. The reason, is because I'm a decent person."

Jason watched him in silence for a moment, contemplating probably. He was always so smart; street-smart or academically-smart, didn't matter. He just needed some time, sometimes. Especially since he came from a poor, drug-addled community filled with thieves, murderers, and rapists, the concept of homosexuality being okay would take some time. Crime alley really was one of the worst places to find yourself anything other than straight.

"Bein' a fag gets ya killed. Or sold off," Jason stated into his covers. That about confirmed Bruce's suspicions.

"I would *never* let that happen to you," Bruce promised without hesitation, feeling the weight of sixteen-year-old Jason Todd's body

heavy in his arms. "There's no shame in wanting someone of your own gender. You'll see when you grow up again." Jason's eyes flicked to the side, hesitating. Bruce waited patiently.

"Roy told me we used to date."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Bruce agreed. He was just that bit older than Jason, reckless, and with a smirk like Jason's. Yeah, Bruce knew they used to date. "Are you still?" Jason shrugged. "What brought this line of questioning on, anyway? Me and Clark kissing?"

"If you like kissing Clark, how come you're not a fa-" At Bruce's pointed eyebrow-raise, Jason shifted his jaw. "Gay."

"I'm bisexual," Bruce said.

"What's that?"

"It means I can be attracted to both my own gender, and other genders."

"Am I bisexual?"

"We've never discussed it. Dick is, however. And possibly Tim."

"You haven't talked about it?" Jason guessed, and Bruce shrugged.

"It's not that important to me. As long as you're happy with whatever romantic partner you have. Okay?" Jason nodded hesitantly, and Bruce ran a hand over what little hair was sticking up from underneath the covers. "Anything else you want to ask?"

Jason considered that.

"Where are the nerf-guns?" Bruce smiled at him.

"If Alfred hasn't given them back to you, you're not looking hard enough. Use your training, if you want them back," he decided, standing up again. "Don't stay up too late reading."

"Not promising anything," Jason yawned, and Bruce slid his door mostly shut on the way out. He'd be out within half an hour, no doubt.

"Master Bruce? Master Damian refuses to go to sleep," came Alfred's call from his bedroom, and Bruce groaned a little, going from fussy child to fussy child.

Indeed, the toddler was decidedly Not Happy about something, but couldn't be cajoled by Alfred to tell them what it was. Finally, Bruce just took him from his butler's arms, and bobbed a little helplessly. Damian was crying, partly from exhaustion, and partly from whatever it was he wouldn't tell them, and it broke his heart to hear his son's exhausted whimpers, but Damian would just scream whenever Bruce tried to put him down.

The co-sleeper was a no-no, and even the big bed didn't seem to please him. He just kept making discontented noises. Bruce sort of gave up on trying to force him to do anything, and kissed the top of his head with a sigh.

"**Damian, little prince, you're obviously very tired. Just take the bat and lie down, I promise I'll be with you in a second**," Bruce promised, but Damian was just making exhausted, angry whimpering noises and hitting his shoulder instead of listening to him.

"Hey B?" Dick called from his room, and Bruce gave Alfred a 'I got this' look. The butler nodded and said his goodnights before disappearing down the hall, as the billionaire stalked over to Dick's room, bouncing Damian on his hip as he went.

"Yes, Richard?"

"Can Damian sleep in here with me?" he asked, eyes wide. Bruce shot the still fussy Damian a skeptical look.

"I don't think that's the greatest idea, Dick. Alfred has to come in and change him in the middle of the night, and he's being really fussy tonight."

"I got it," Dick promised, reaching his hands out for Damian.

"You need your sleep too, Dick, you shouldn't have to deal with a fussy toddler," Bruce protested.

"C'mon, B, hand him over! We'll have our own little sleepover, right little D?" he beamed, still reaching. Well, Bruce could move Damian as soon as Dick fell asleep. It'd be fine. If Dick wanted to cuddle the little boy for now, sure.

"Alright," Bruce agreed, handing the fussy Damian over and fully expecting to get him almost immediately handed back with screaming involved, but Dick just planted a loud kiss on Damian's forehead, tucked him into bed next to him like he was a teddy-bear, and gave

him the little plush bat to hold onto.

"Sweet dreams, little D!" Dick whispered, and Damian was probably too shocked by this treatment by anyone other than Bruce and Clark to yell about it. Bruce watched in mild fascination and astonishment as Damian's blinks got a little slower and Dick slid down next to him, humming under his breath. The little fussy, hiccupy noises were practically gone as Damian watched Dick only mildly suspiciously, probably having tired himself out already. It was way past his bedtime anyway, Bruce was sort of surprised he'd made it this far. "See? I got this."

Damian did look comfortable, snuggled up next to Dick and sucking on the ear of his bat. When Dick stroked Damian's eyebrow gently, the toddler's eyes closed completely, and Bruce remembered doing that to Dick when he was a child, smaller than now. Freshly moved into the manor, having nightmares, he'd ended up in Bruce's bed a lot in his terror. Bruce vaguely remembered his own father doing so to get him to close his eyes, and that Dick instinctively did it to Damian made a dull ache settle in his chest.

"Alright," Bruce agreed quietly. "Are you sure?"

"*Yes*," Dick repeated firmly.

"Okay. Well, if he starts fussing or you change your mind, you know where I am." Dick beamed at him.

"Of course, B. Goodnight," he said. Bruce hesitated for a moment, but then he dropped a kiss on Dick's forehead too. The brightness of Dick's beaming doubled.

"Goodnight, Dick," he said, turning the light off. He had his questions about Dick's motives to suddenly get his brothers to stay in their own beds, when he'd been leader of the sleepovers, lately, but was ultimately thankful that Damian had found peace with him there. Hopefully both of them would get their required sleep.

He left Dick's door slightly open too, and saw Clark step out of Tim's room with a smile on his face.

"Leave it a little open," Bruce said when Clark went to close the door, and the other man nodded.

"Did Damian finally manage to go to sleep?" he asked as they stepped closer to each other.

"Dick insisted that he sleep with him, and he nodded off almost immediately. I think we're getting too boring for him," he reported, and Clark snorted.

"As if. Your baby is a prime example of a drama queen, and if he doesn't get the attention he feels he deserves, he will yell until he gets it," he said, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"Yes, well, at least he only screams now, when he's older he'll destroy a few training-dolls and possibly stab a sibling before he comes out with that." Clark chuckled a little.

"Sounds like him. Hey, um," he began, and Bruce quirked an eyebrow at him in question. They'd drifted even closer to each other, less than a foot of space between them. Bruce had to tip his head up the slightest bit to make comfortable eye-contact with Clark at this range.

"Yes, Kal?"

"You want me to fly home tonight?" Clark asked, shoving his hands into his pockets. He still wasn't wearing the glasses, making his blue eyes almost glitter in the slight darkness of the hallway, and Bruce contemplated that.

"No," he decided, taking Clark's hand and pulling him into his bedroom.

"Oh, um- That's-that's nice," Clark stuttered as Bruce shut the door behind them, sort of wide-eyed when Bruce nudged him backwards towards the bed.

"What's the matter, Clark?" the billionaire asked as the back of Clark's knees hit the edge of the bed. The reporter sank down on the soft covers, a smile on his face.

"Nothing. Just, y'know. It's really from zero to a hundred with you in a second, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Bruce questioned as his hands went to Clark's shoulders, smoothing over his soft skin underneath his flannel, and up to cupping his face. His jawline was strong underneath Bruce's calloused hands, the skin warm and inviting.

"Well, we just nighted your kids and now you're jumping me," Clark grinned, hooking his fingers into the little belt-loops on Bruce's pants to steady himself. Also a bit of an excuse to pull Bruce closer to him,

getting the billionaire to stand between his spread legs. This close, the smell of Bruce's cologne was overwhelming and warm, and his eyes were a soft, murky-sea blue in the light from the lamps on the nightstands.

"It's nine pm, Clark, I'm not going to go to bed at nine just because my kids are doing it. I'm the goddamn Batman," Bruce said, sounding mildly offended, and Clark just laughed. Bruce wanted to drink that laughter from his mouth, and reminded himself he was allowed now. Clark was obviously thinking the same thing, because they met halfway in a nice show of how attuned they were.

Bruce began pushing Clark back on the bed, stalking up after him like a predator about to get it's dinner, and while that mental image was actually sort of fanning the flames in Clark's stomach, he was still sort of occupied with the other five heartbeats in the house.

"Hey, what if someone comes in? Or if we wake someone up?" Clark asked worriedly between brief kisses, too aware of the bats and their tendency to pop up whenever they're not invited.

"We'll take it slow," Bruce reassured him, and Clark nodded, guiding Bruce's mouth back to his own, a little scared that Bruce would change his mind tomorrow, and this would be all they ever got. Slow, he could do, if it meant having Bruce.

But slow was really hard when you'd been wanting each other for a while. Harder when it'd been a couple of *years*.

Clark found his hands wandering, his tongue hot in Bruce's mouth, and Bruce found that it was surprisingly hard to focus on anything else than Clark when he kept making little sighs and moans. They were pretty much twined around each other within minutes, grinding into each other and running hands over each other's thighs.

Bruce's eyes were more black than blue when Clark pushed him up again, the billionaire straddling his hips. Without hesitation, he shoved his hands up underneath Bruce's plain polo, and pulled upwards until Bruce took charge and tossed it over his own head and somewhere onto the dark floor.

Immediately, Clark's hands went out to explore all that skin, all that strong muscle, all those scars, pressing kisses where he went. Bruce cursed under his breath as he fiddled with the buttons on Clark's shirt. It seemed even the great Batman had trouble focusing when he had hands all over his torso and someone mouthing against his neck. Clark

chuckled with his nose pressed to Bruce's throat, and heard a rumbling groan in response, felt the vibrations against his cheek.

Bruce had a bit of stubble, probably hadn't had time to shave in a while, and the sensation of it rubbing against Clark's skin was new, but not unpleasant. It was sort of nice, really. Clark had never been overstimulated in his life, but there was definitely a sensation of buzzing under his skin that he didn't really recall ever feeling. Maybe that was just because it was Bruce.

He tilted his head, nudging Clark's mouth back to his, and they shared a fiery, wet kiss, with Bruce gasping into his mouth. Feeling a little brave from the little juts of Bruce's hips against his thigh and the panting, Clark's fingers snuck in underneath the edge of Bruce's now undoubtedly creased pants, and groped his very firm ass.

"God. *Up*," Bruce growled as he tore himself off of Clark's mouth, a little breathless, and Clark reluctantly removed his hand from Bruce's ass only to sit up and toss his own shirt off. Now that Bruce had Clark's attention, he smoothed both hands from the planes of his stomach up to his chest, drinking in the sight of all that smooth, unmarked skin. "Are the abs genetic? You can't work out."

Clark laughed.

"Stop thinking for a while, please?" he pleaded. He honestly didn't know how to answer that question. Bruce's slightly blissed out face began forming frown-lines again when he paused to do exactly what Clark had told him not to, and Clark whined, not a very sexy one, mostly just frustrated as he tugged on the loops of Bruce's pants. "These need to come off."

"What happened to clothes-on?" Bruce smirked, the frown-lines turning into smile-lines, and yes, that, that was much better. What would be even *better* would be if his strong, usually so controlled features were relaxed in pleasure, but Clark was getting there. The fear of getting caught was way smaller than the need to see Bruce naked and feeling him.

"I'll stop if you want me to," Clark promised, his hands freezing right where they were, but Bruce just ground down on him, their cocks bumping together and making Clark moan softly. *God*, that felt good. Clark had been a little too hung up lately to try and date anyone else, and he really wasn't one for casual flings. This wasn't going to last as long as he wanted it to.

"I was just mocking your chasteness, not pulling consent," Bruce pointed out, cupping Clark's face to kiss him harder, before reaching down to undo the button on his pants and his fly. The back of Bruce's hand brushed against Clark through his underwear, and Clark groaned, bucking up a little helplessly.

Bruce's hand in his hair was really nice and reassuring, fingertips massaging his skull as his face was angled properly for the sort of deep kisses that made Clark breathless and his hands shaky.

"Hey, hey, B," Clark breathed between kisses, letting out a silent little moan when Bruce's hand in his hair tightened and tugged. "Slow- slow down. We've got all the time in the world."

"We really don't," Bruce growled against his jawline, where he was pressing a few hot, wet kisses. "I doubt the kids are going to stay away for long. That reminds me."

Bruce crawled off of Clark, and rolled off the bed, hurriedly making his way over to the door, whilst simultaneously stepping out of his pants and leaving them on the floor. Clark was half-way mesmerized by the sight of Bruce's ass covered only by black trunks. His back was scarred but muscular now that Clark actually got to see it without it being a medical-emergency.

"Where are you going?" he blurted when it looked like Bruce was seriously about to leave him here, half-naked and with his pants open.

"Locking the door. Take off your pants," Bruce said calmly.

"What? But what if one of the kids need you?" he asked, wiggling out of his pants and socks as Bruce got back up on the bed.

"You'll hear them. Also, would you rather they walked right in on me getting fucked into the bed?" Clark sputtered, the blush rising high on his cheeks as Bruce sat down on his knees. Maybe he should offer the other man an out. Just because they'd decided to try a relationship didn't mean they had to fuck immediately. Did Bruce really want to, yes, of course, but Clark might not, and Bruce wasn't going to try and push him into anything yet. However, there was a very obvious, good-looking bulge tenting the front of Clark's horrible tighty whities. Better safe than sorry. "Or maybe I'm too hasty again?"

"No, no," Clark hurried to reassure, crawling over to Bruce and running his hands over his bare legs. Bruce had really muscular thighs, and Clark found his mouth watering a little as he thumbed a

scar on the outside of Bruce's knee. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Bruce asked, forcing himself to tone down the little whine in his voice. He was *not* a teenage boy about to have his first fuck, for gods sake.

"Well, it's- I mean-" Clark stuttered, before mumbling something into his lap, and the billionaire blinked in surprise. He couldn't have heard that right.

"Clark," he said slowly. "Repeat that for those of us who don't have super-hearing." The reporter swallowed, and shrugged a little helplessly.

"It's not that big of a deal-"

"You've never had sex with a guy?" Bruce asked clearly, and the flush on Clark's face spoke a thousand words. Bruce felt the fire in his stomach flare, but the frown on his face was a knee-jerk reaction.

"It's not *that* different, is it?" the other man questioned. Bruce huffed in surprise.

"Depends what end you're on," he pointed out, and Clark nodded, still flushed.

"Right. Yeah, and what end would you like to be on?"

Bruce considered that. Clark's lack of experience would mean longer foreplay and longer prep-time. Normally he'd enjoy that, but right now, naked, with Clark's hands high up on his thighs, gently squeezing, that thumb brushing against the inside of his thigh, and Clark's stupid, floppy hair and blushing cheeks, he felt his patience run dangerously thin. He'd take his time with Clark later, when he could lay him out on the bed, take his time with him. Right now, he wanted to get off on Clark. The in part would have to wait.

"Receiving. Trust me?" Bruce said, raising an eyebrow. Clark bit his lip, looking surprisingly sexy with the mussed hair and broad shoulders. The tighty whities didn't help, but the lip did.

"Of course, B. I mean, I could-"

"It's faster and we both want to get off, right?" Bruce said pointedly, and Clark nodded a little hastily, his eyes roaming over Bruce's torso again.

"Right yeah, yeah," he agreed heartily, dropping a kiss over Bruce's navel. He nudged at his hip, and Bruce realized horizontal would be a good place to start, so he fell back on the bedding.

Clark immediately set to work mapping out Bruce's entire torso with his mouth. The scars got extra love and attention, and Bruce let that go on for long enough that Clark had managed his way up to his collarbones.

"So much hurt," he mumbled into the kiss Bruce pulled him into. "Wanna make it better."

"Shut up," Bruce said, not missing the slight tone of desperation in his voice. He really didn't need Clark saying that sort of stuff right now.

"Just wrap you up and take such goo-" Clark began whispering, but Bruce shut him up by making the kiss deeper and rolling him over.

Once he was securely straddling Clark's hips, he shimmied out of his underwear, and reached for the nightstand for the lube. As soon as he had it in his hand, he sat back up again, and glanced at Clark. The reporter looked a little dazzled, eyes on Bruce's dick, and Bruce let himself smirk a little. Clark looked sweet when he was gobsmacked.

"How you doing there, Superman?" he said, quirking an eyebrow, and Clark met his eyes, mouth slightly agape, before he chuckled.

"Don't mock me. You're *gorgeous*," he said reverently. "'S not my fault."

"Hmmm," Bruce said, popping the cap of the lube open with a snap.

"Can... can I?" Clark asked a little shyly just before Bruce poured the lube out on his fingers.

Well. It'd be a learning experience.

"Hand," he demanded, and Clark held his hand out. Bruce slathered two fingers in lube, and guided his hand back. "One finger till I tell you more."

Clark's finger circled his hole, smearing the lube, before he gently pushed his fingertip in. Bruce relaxed and breathed, making the finger sink in further. He was impatient, so he used his excellent body-control to relax and let Clark fingerfuck him with at least three fingers before he'd had enough.

Surprisingly, Clark flipped him over before he could try to ride him, and, admittedly, it was a nice view. Clark was close enough that Bruce could feel all that glorious body-heat and that muscle-definition pressed up against him, but he didn't feel trapped.

"This okay?" Clark asked worriedly, and Bruce rolled his eyes.

"I'm not a fraglie porcelain doll, Kal," he complained, hiking his legs up around Clark's waist for some support. "Now fuck me."

"You're awfully bossy," Clark pointed out, dropping a quick kiss on his lips before he gripped his cock, and pushed into him slowly.

Bruce had a really good comeback to that, but he hadn't been fucked in... quite a while, and he wouldn't say he'd forgotten the warm, heady sensation of being filled, but he definitely hadn't remembered everything, that's for sure.

"Oh my god," he said instead of something clever, without really thinking, because Clark wasn't small, and from the way he felt a muscle tremble in Clark's thigh as he thrust shallowly, he was one of those who enjoyed vocalness. Bruce could definitely do that. "Fuck."

"Are you alright, Bruce?" Clark asked in concern, his hair flopping forward over his forehead, but not concealing his bright blue eyes. Bruce clenched down on him, and felt his own thighs shake. This might go a little faster than he'd intended. The fire in the pit of his stomach was dangerously hot, like overflowing, molten lava, and yeah, no, despite the control he usually had over his body, this was going to push him over the edge. Luckily, Clark looked just as desperate, arm muscles straining and his breath coming in little shocked gasps.

"Yes. Fuck me," Bruce said without hesitation, wrapping an arm around Clark's neck and pulling him down into his shoulder so he wouldn't be looking at him with those concerned, loving eyes anymore. Slowly, Clark began to move, long, smooth strokes, just breathing deeply to restrain himself. Bruce was just so warm and tight around him, and the arm around his neck was joined by its twin as Bruce gasped. He'd just hit his prostate.

Their love-making was quiet but for a few gasps and groans, until finally Clark began losing it a little bit. There was smacking of skin against skin, and Bruce pulling hair, and Clark growling into Bruce's mouth as he fucked into him.

However, it didn't take long with Clark's hand on his cock for Bruce to come, painting both of their chests with ropes of cum. Clark pulled out and came on his chest shortly after, before Bruce collapsed on top of Clark.

Sticky and sweaty, it took a while before either of them felt the need to move. Bruce hadn't had a good orgasm in a while, and found the endorphine rush a little overwhelming, and Clark was just overwhelmingly happy that it was Bruce laying on top of him and breathing slowly.

"Think you can fall asleep now, Batman?" Clark asked when they'd both caught their breath again, and held fast when Bruce tried to roll out of his arms. He laughed at Bruce's annoyed grumbles. "Sorry, sorry, please don't go."

"Make one more smartass joke like that and you're out on your ass in the hallway," the other man muttered, but was a little too drowzy and warm and stupidly enough into Clark to actually put any force behind the words. "We're gonna need to clean up soon enough. And unlock the door."

Clark reached his hearing out over the manor. Cassandra was asleep, wearing earbuds with music still playing, Jason was sighing in his sleep, Damian's soft breaths and Dick's slow heartbeat spoke volumes, and Tim was dead to the world, heartbeat slow and calm. Alfred was up and in the batcave, and his low voice indicated he was speaking to Batgirl and Arsenal on the comms.

"Everyone's good for now," he smiled, pressing a kiss to Bruce's sweaty forehead and tracing the slight curl of the hair at the nape of his neck. "We've got time."

"Hngh. I'm not gonna let your cum dry on me," Bruce groaned, rolling away from him. Clark stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"I've got it B," he promised, meeting Bruce's eyes. *Let me take care of you.* Bruce stared back in silence for a while, before he slowly sank back on the bed.

"Fine. Washing cloths are in the cupboard under the sink," Bruce sighed, and sank back onto the sheets. Clark rolled out, smiling to himself.

Bruce might not want him to say it out loud, but if he was sneaky about it, he could still take care of him, tend to his scars, help him

heal from whatever the hell past partners had done to him. Clark could do it, and would love him whilst doing it. There was no doubt in his mind about that.

They ended up not unlocking the door at all, too busy devouring each other and discovering each other to take the time. Clark occasionally tossed an ear out to the rest of the house, but the walls were sturdy, and even when they were loud, nobody stirred. It wasn't until at least three am that they had tired each other out for now.

Bruce was perched on top of Clark again, lazily dropping kisses and tracing circles all over his torso, when Clark yawned so big his jaw cracked. Bruce smiled at him.

"Tired?" he questioned. Clark smiled back, a happy, content smile that Bruce made himself quickly memorize and lock away in the Clark-box in his mind. It was currently overflowing with very nice visuals, but Bruce could never be sure how long Clark could stand him. Just... For safe-keeping, he kept the memories in the Clark-box.

"Yeah, Bruce, you've been wearing me out," the kryptonian teased.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. You're way less... patient than I thought you would be," Clark said a little dreamily as Bruce nipped at his collar bone, sitting up to trace his reverent fingers down Clark's smooth abs, the happy trail in the middle.

"You've been imagining it, huh?" Bruce asked a little smugly. Clark scoffed.

"Yeah. You haven't?"

"For research purposes." The reporter laughed, and finally forced his jellied limbs to move. He grabbed the backs of Bruce's thighs and slid one hand up his back to bring him down for a kiss.

"Research purposes? You liar. It's alright Bruce, you're allowed to have fantasies about me, 'cause, you know, you loooove me," Clark sang, feeling happy and sappy and absolutely in love. Bruce grumbled against his mouth.

"Do not," he muttered, but Clark wrapped his other arm around his

shoulders and flipped them with only slightly less grace than he was used to. Bruce was heavier than the average women he'd been with before, and had much broader shoulders. It wasn't bad, just... New. Different. Would take a bit of time to get used to the mind-boggling fact that he was actually dating *Bruce Wayne*, his best friend and confidante.

"Do too," Clark grinned at Bruce's beautiful face, and received an eye-roll, but Bruce didn't protest the change in position, only shifted a bit to make himself more comfortable, and that he stayed there, that he didn't protest, that really spoke more of what Bruce was feeling.

Bruce Wayne was very much a man of actions, rather than words. Clark kissed him again, enjoying that he had the possibility now. When Bruce kissed back, his hands sliding over Clark's shoulders, he felt his heart soar.

"You've been spending too much time with the children," Bruce mused, rocking his hips to make Clark let out a soft moan. He buried his face in Bruce's neck as a blush rose to his cheeks.

"Guh. Not fair," Clark protested when Bruce began kissing his neck and grabbing a good part of his ass to squeeze.

Bruce only hummed, the noise rumbling through his chest warmly, like he was a huge, very satisfied cat, and Clark let himself get pulled under again, drowning in the scent and feel of Bruce.

Bruce woke up the next morning with Clark draped over his back like a heavy blanket, with the sun in his eyes, and wondered why it felt so surprisingly comforting. Also, where the hell were his kids? They'd barely even looked at their own beds for two weeks, but now they suddenly decided it was a brilliant idea to sleep alone? If they were insistent, they would've picked the lock.

Rolling the other man over, Bruce ended up straddling his hips, and had a moment of weakness, just sitting there, watching, admiring the body beneath him. Clark was unsurprisingly just as good-looking when he was asleep as he was awake, and Bruce liked watching him, now that he no longer had to restrain and tamp down on that tendency. He ran a hand down Clark's sculpted front, before he shook his head at himself and got out of bed. Leaving the reporter sleeping, he wrapped himself up in a bathrobe he had hanging in his closet and left the room, checking his emails as he went.

Patrol had gone fine, Barbara had "kicked Riddler's ass at his own stupid game", in Stephanie's own words, and they'd uncovered a warehouse full of weapons belonging to one of the gang-families in Gotham. The last thing they needed was a gang-war, so they'd pinged the warehouse for him, ready to take action if they had to.

There were noises coming from the kitchen, so Bruce strode in there, fully expecting Alfred and four boys, and instead found no Alfred and six boys.

"Good morning," he said slowly, and Kon jumped, always a little awkward around him. From the slightly awkward look on his face now, Bruce could tell he hadn't really showered well enough after last night's escapades.

"Morning B!" Dick chirped, feeding Damian a slice of banana. The toddler ignored Bruce when he brushed a hand over his hair, but he hadn't really expected anything else. Maybe a demand to be picked up, but Damian looked perfectly content in his high chair by the kitchen table. Tim was sleepily leaning against Kon's chest, shoving a piece of toast in his mouth.

Roy had one foot on Jason's chair, leaning against the wall behind him, and Jason was leaning against said leg, sipping orange juice. He looked rumpled, his hair mussed in a very sweet way. Bruce mussed it up worse, and got a grumble in response.

"Sup, Bats," Roy smiled, looking post-patrol tired. Bruce recieved a one armed hug from Dick, which he graciously accepted and tried to memorize. He probably wasn't going to get a lot of those in the near future.

"When did you get here?" Bruce asked the two of them skeptically.

"My test starts at twelve, so I don't really need to be there until then," Kon said with a shrug. Tim smiled up at him happily, like he'd hung the moon in the sky, and Kon smiled back at him, obviously also very happy with this choice. Roy shrugged.

"Like half an hour ago. Is this yogurt super expensive or is it available for us peasants too?" he asked, spooning some yogurt into his mouth. Bruce didn't really have enough energy to care. Alfred had let them in, undoubtedly, otherwise his alarms would've woken him up whether he liked it or not.

"I don't buy my own groceries," he said, going for the coffee maker. He

could use the caffeine for today.

"Of course you don't," Roy agreed with a sigh.

"You shouldn't be skipping school," Dick said primly, as Jason held out his hand for a fistbump. Kon bumped him, and shrugged at Dick.

"It's fine. They'll just be happy I showed up for the test."

"Where's Alfred?" Bruce interrupted before they could start anything with each other.

"Doing laundry. Tim wants his dress and Jason has no clean underwear," Dick replied easily, slurping on his cereal. Seriously, the kid was gonna get some nutrient-deficiency if he didn't eat anything else soon.

"Want bacon and eggs or something of the like?" Bruce asked mildly.

"Are you gonna be the one making them?" Jason asked skeptically.

"I can cook," Bruce said a little defensively.

"Toast, maybe," Tim sassed, and Bruce pinned him with a look that made him shrink a little in Kon's lap and give him an innocent, sweet smile.

"That's what I thought. You want eggs and bacon or not?"

"I'll make some," Roy offered, standing up and shoving a last spoonful of yogurt in his mouth before tossing the little plastic container in the trash and the spoon in the dishwasher. "This way everyone wins."

"Fine," Bruce sighed, a little too worn out to argue. Besides, Roy moving meant Jason moving, the two of them moving over to the stovetop, and it was sort of sweet to see Jason so curious and ready to follow Roy.

Bruce leaned against the kitchen island, sipping his coffee, as he watched Roy and Jason bicker and prepare food. It was... Calm. Peaceful, even, which Bruce had trouble believing really. He was concerned when it was quiet, for Gods sake. And yet, his boys surprised him, by keeping it together and not even yelling at each other at all during breakfast.

Alfred stopped by to hand Jason a pair of clean underwear, and also to give Bruce a Look, one of smug satisfaction that he'd been right.

Bruce decided to wipe that smug look off of his face, but was immediately rebutted by Alfred asking him how Master Clark was doing.

"Still asleep," Bruce said through gritted teeth, and Alfred gave him one of those acknowledging nods with that private smile that made Bruce feel like an awkward teenager again. After asking Mr. Harper politely to toss the eggshells in the trash, he went to take Titus for a walk.

Bruce was reading the Gotham Gazette by the kitchen island when there was the sound of sparks behind him, and he looked over his shoulder as Zatanna appeared in the doorway. Immediately Bruce's phone began beeping at him, and he shut the intruder-alarm off.

"Don't teleport straight into the house," Bruce chided, and Zatanna ignored him.

"Raunchy," she said, looking him up and down and smirking. Bruce took a sip of his coffee, feeling warmth returning to his limbs. He was usually a tea drinker, but Alfred's tea always seemed to come out better than his, and he didn't feel like sipping disappointment. Roy had made some, and this was definitely satisfactory.

"Says the woman dressed like a Playboy-bunny with an added top hat," he fired back. Really, he just felt Zatanna's clothing choices weren't optimal for her protection, but seeing as she wouldn't listen to him about kevlar and relying on things other than magic to save her, he'd given up on trying to convince her to wear something more appropriate.

"I do that all the time. I think this is the first time in my life I've ever seen your calf. I didn't even know you had calves, B," she laughed, pulling her top hat off with a flourish.

"Maybe he's born with it. Maybe it's Maybeline," Dick stage-whispered, and Bruce stuck his calf out like a model, pointed toe and all, much to his children's amusement and giggles.

"Well, I think I've got it figured out," Zatanna grinned, looking him up and down and getting stuck on where Bruce's bathrobe was slipping a little. The moment Bruce noticed the hickey, he internally groaned and pulled the robe tighter. However, Zatanna had gotten her fill. "Yeah, I've got the spell. Just gotta decipher some bits, so be prepared for me popping in sometime today when I've got it all figured out. Just thought you could use a heads-up."

"Appreciate it," Bruce grumbled. "Would you like a strip of bacon before you leave?"

"A strip of bacon, coming up," Roy agreed over by the stove, and held out a plate with a few bacon strips on it. Jason took it, and held it out to a smirking Zatanna.

"Thank you Jason," she smiled, and he blushed and scurried back to Roy's side.

"Hey, Batman, do you need a personal chef? How good's the pay?" the archer tossed over his shoulder.

"No," Bruce said without hesitation, and took another sip of his coffee. Zatanna chuckled again, before she visibly counted on her fingers, and disappeared in another spark-shower.

"Alright, this means your hours as young children are coming to an end. What do you want to do?" Bruce sighed, and turned to his children.

"Can we go down to the batcave?" Dick asked with wide eyes, and Bruce considered that. There was definitely something about Dick and Zatanna that was off. Currently, he didn't particularly care, if only because Zatanna wouldn't intentionally cause him any harm, and because Dick had never been that great at planning out schemes.

"Sure. I need to analyze last night's reports and check on Cassandra anyways," Bruce agreed, putting the newspaper down. Roy finished shovelling egg into his face, and . "Bring your teenagers and whatever toys you want." When Jason perked up, Bruce held a hand up. "No, you may not have the nerf-ammo back. You're apparently still being punished, since Alfred hasn't given them back. Also no, you may not bring a nerf-gun to hit Tim with."

"Fun-vampire!" Jason accused, and Tim stuck his tongue out at him over Kon's shoulder from where he'd been picked up. Jason was up on his feet in a moment, and Roy wasn't far behind.

"Jay, babe, hotshot, slow down," he smirked, nudging Jason a little roughly. Jason immediately retaliated, shoving Roy back onto the kitchen floor, and the redhead laughed as Jason fell with him. "Attaboy Jase, just like old times!"

"Shut up, Roy," Jason said, flushing as he scrambled off of Roy's chest.

"Give us a kiss, Jaybird!" Roy snickered, and Jason pulled a very tiny nerf-handgun he must have hidden from Alfred out from under one of the shelves in the kitchen and shot him in the neck. Roy made an unattractive snorting-noise, but rolled up onto his feet, going after Jason, who was laughing his ass off again. Dick pulled on Kon, who was hauling Tim, which left Bruce with Damian in the kitchen.

"**Good morning little prince. Did you sleep well with Dick?**" Bruce asked Damian, wiping his hands down with a wet paper towel. Damian yawned.

"**He hugs a lot**," he complained when his father hoisted him out of the high-chair. Bruce scoffed.

"**Clark hugs you more**," he reminded him, and Damian smirked a little like a cat that got the canary. Bruce smiled back at him. "Were you nice to each other?"

"**Di made me cerel**," Damian announced proudly, like he'd already turned Dick into his personal servant, and Bruce scoffed at his proud little toddler, kissing one of his fat little cheeks.

"**What toys do you want with you down in the cave?**"

"**Titus, ball, paper**," Damian listed without hesitation, pointing in the direction of the ball on the floor underneath the table. Bruce set him down.

"**Go get it**," he agreed, snagging a pile of paper and a pencil case with toddler-Damian's crayons from the counter-top, where Alfred had no doubt stacked it in anticipation of this. Honestly, Bruce didn't want to think about how his life would be like without Alfred in it.

Damian grabbed for the ball as he held onto the chair, but the ball rolled further away from him, and Damian yelled 'fuck' at the top of his lungs again, and Bruce internally decided to ground Jason, whether he'd be here by the end of the day or not.

Chapter End Notes

> I'm sorry if it's a little messy, I've literally nearly passed out by my computer just to finish this chapter and get it out to you. I'll go over it again tomorrow when I'm less tired. A couple more chapters to go!

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and being awesome!!! I love you all immensely !!! <3<3<3

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kon kept them all safe on the jungle gym, flying in lazy circles around the structure and laughing at the kids' antics. Roy got to the highest point of the jungle gym in no time, and stayed there, giving Jason pointers and telling Tim where to keep his feet. Bruce waited until he could take a picture where none of his kids could be seen, and then sent it off to Ollie, without any caption.

He knew they had a rocky relationship right now, same as with him and Jason; another reason why the two youngsters got along. But, if there was one thing he felt he'd learned from these two weeks, it was that sometimes you needed to be reminded that your kids were still your kids, no matter how old they were. Dick still couldn't find two matching socks to save his life, Tim still hyper-focused, and apparently, Roy still found the highest ground with the best strategic view.

Bruce could remember a young Speedy hiding high up in the rafters of whatever warehouse they were at in Star City, and Robin calling up to him, asking him how to get up there so they could watch the world underneath them together. Oliver could always use a reminder of what he was missing in Roy.

Cassandra was doing better, and walked out to the main room of the cave to sit in a chair next to Bruce a majority of the morning as he read through reports and checked in with contacts, picking apart a contract with Lex industries and sending it back with about a billion corrections. Stephanie was asleep in the infirmary for some reason, probably to stay close to Cass. Bruce didn't blame her.

Tim kept reminding Kon to look at the clock, *look at the clock, keep the time, you have to be in Kansas in two hours, remember that*. It was sweet, really, and Kon rolled his eyes just about every time, but dutifully glanced over at the monitors displaying the time.

Finally, they hopped off the jungle gym, moving on to the toys they brought to the cave. Roy had a very small bow with plastic suction-

cup arrows and was trying to hit Jason with them as the ten-year-old laughed and tried to run away. Tim was trying to do a cartwheel on the sparring mats, with Dick's assistance, and Kon was sitting on the floor next to Damian, passing the ball to the toddler and getting it tossed back to him. Cassandra moved back into the infirmary with Bruce's help, and then when he appeared back out of the med-bay, he just stopped to stare.

His boys really were too clever for him. He remembered Clark asking him, why would he train all his kids to help him when he wouldn't let them. The truth was, he wasn't training them to help him. Not like Clark assumed, at least. He trained them to be better than him, surpass him in any way possible. Dick hit the mark on compassion, Tim in being the most clever, and Jason in making tough calls. Damian, Damian was still growing, still learning, but Cassandra was by far his superior in fighting.

He wasn't training them to help him, he was training them to be better, to help their cause, but to ultimately be *better*.

As he stood there pondering, lost in his thoughts, there was the sound of sparks shooting behind him. Suddenly, Dick let out a yelp, and Jason keeled over. Roy frowned, the little plastic bow lowering, and Kon shouted an expletive as he tried to move towards Tim. An invisible force was holding him back.

"Boys?" Bruce said tersely, alarmed and moving towards them, but Zatanna was behind him, grabbing his arm and pulling him back.

"Give it a second," she said decisively, eyes narrowed. The boys, all lying on the floor and obviously in pain, lit up with the same blue-purpleish light that had made them small in the first place. Bruce stared in mute horror as the light grew, and then blinded him for a moment.

He blinked the light out of his eyes, and as quickly as possible looked at the cave-floor, where all of his children were laying splayed out, all naked.

And all back to their respective ages.

"Ow," Tim groaned, stretching a hand out into thin air.

"Tim!" Kon exclaimed, breaking free from whatever force-field Zatanna had conjured to hold him, grabbing that outstretched hand and dropping down next to him.

"That was wicked painful," Jason grunted, rolling over on his back with a pained moan. Roy smirked at him, poking at his side with a toe. "Fuck you, Roy. I blame this all on you, B."

"Well, that truly means everything is back to normal, doesn't it?" Bruce mused as Roy laughed. Carefully, Bruce moved closer to the sparring mats, eyeing his kids. The cut on Jason's forehead was gone, and the scratches on Dick's arms too. Was time rewound for them now? Or had she just healed the cuts as well? He needed to determine what they remembered.

"That's what I wanna hear," Zatanna said with a pleased grin. "Well, that should do it. Got places to be. Call if something even weirder happens." With a wave of a hand, she spoke rapidly, and disappeared in a shower of sparks again. Internally, Bruce groaned. She'd be nearly impossible to get a hold of again if something actually was wrong with them.

"No, wait!" Tim groaned. "It's Dick's fault! It's all on him and Zatanna."

"What?" Dick asked, sitting up, and with a distracted look on his face as he rubbed his shoulders. "Man, shrinking hurt a lot less than growing did."

"He and Zatanna set us up," Tim said, getting an arm underneath himself, simultaneously waving his concerned boyfriend off and shifting into a half-sitting position. Damian still wasn't moving.

"Damian?" Bruce said, crouching down next to his youngest son. "Are you alright?" Damian made a muffled angry sound into the blanket he was laying face-down on, making a fist with one of his hands.

"Richard," he grit out very slowly and loudly, and Dick sort of tensed on the floor. The rage in his voice was just about normal, and Bruce felt a little relieved. At least this hadn't had any lasting effects on their personalities. "If you are the reason I was turned into a blubbering child, I am going to gut you and string your intestines up like Christmas decorations!"

And with that, he fluidly shifted upright, and Dick rolled out of the way of his other two brothers, quickly getting a computerchair between all of them.

"It was Jason's idea in the first place!" Dick said innocently, smiling at all of them. "Really, guys, c'mon, we don't have to be hasty here, I mean-"

"I don't even know what the hell happened to us, Dick-cheese! Stop fucking blaming *me* for your hare-brained plans!" Jason exclaimed, advancing on the chair quickly.

"You said that B would be less cranky if he got some! And also that he and Supes have been making moon eyes at each other since you were wearing green, scaly panties," Dick hurried to say, pushing the chair in Jason's direction when he tried to advance and hopped onto another one. "And that got me thinking. And Zatanna found a good, easy spell!"

Jason groaned with his face in his hands, Damian's teeth were gritted and fists clenched as he watched Dick move away with narrowed eyes, but Tim made a 'you have a point' face. Bruce raised his eyebrow at him, and Tim shrugged in response. Bruce internally sighed, and went to pick up his cup of cold coffee again.

"That turned us into children?" Tim asked skeptically, putting his hands on his hips. "And how would that help?"

"Because Supes needed to remember that Bruce wasn't always this rough and that he can be very gentle if faced with the right circumstances. Also, we're all good at body language, and those who aren't blind can see what's going on between the two of those. Kids are just much more frank when talking about it! Also also, being good with kids is an indicator of how good a partner that person will be!" Dick explained, winking at Bruce theatrically.

"You've read one to many Cosmos, Grayson," Damian seethed, and Bruce leaned against the computer-panel. He wouldn't have to do any interrogating on his own, with the speed his kids were ready to rip into Dick.

"You just wanted him to hug you again, didn't you, *little daddy's boy*?" Jason sneered mockingly as he lunged for the chair Dick was hiding behind. Dick cartwheeled out of his way quickly, hopping back onto the mats as Jason made an enraged noise.

"I'd like to helpfully point out that the person that's been cuddled most as a child now is probably you, Jason," Tim pointed out, and Jason stood stock still for maybe two seconds before he was after Tim instead, who promptly kicked him in the chest and got him on the ground in a second.

"Hot," Kon said, looking a little starry-eyed. Bruce pinned Superboy with a look, and Kon shot back a sheepish grin. "Hey, I'm allowed to

say that now! He's back to normal. Nobody is creeped out anymore. *I'm* no longer creeped out."

"Dick and Zatanna were the ones to put the cameras in Clark's apartment," Bruce realized out loud to himself, squinting at Kon until the boy looked away, embarrassed. Yes, that would make sense. It was essentially what he'd assumed in the first place, but with the added twist of Dick doing it not to get with Superman, but to set *him* up with Superman. Currently, he was a little too fucked-out to give enough of a damn to chastise him. Really, Dick had had way worse plans. "Planning ahead? I don't know if I'm angry or proud."

"Proud, since he's the golden bird," Jason growled, tossing Tim off him and going back after Dick.

"Why nine years?" Bruce asked, trying to keep them on topic. That one had bothered him a little. It could've just as well been ten, or eight, or six. "That's a very specific number."

"Well, because Jason needed to be young enough that he'd be unable to stay on his own, Damian needed to be young enough so he couldn't call Clark names, and I know he learned English at three, Tim needed to be young enough so he couldn't figure it out and tattle on me, and I needed to be old enough to wrangle all three and also remember the plan," Dick explained patiently, counting on his fingers.

"So that's why all of you had recollections of things. *You* needed to remember the plan. It must've slipped through to the other three, however filtered. Hence the reflexes, Tim knowing how to pack a punch... Hmmm."

"That's an approving hum! Why does he get an approving hum?" Jason asked incredulously, with his hands on his hips angrily. Bruce shrugged.

"It was clever," he admitted. "Dangerous, stupid, *reckless*, and irresponsible, but also... A little clever."

Dick beamed at him, and even Tim rolled his eyes at him now.

"As much fun as this whole horrible experience has been, I want to take a shower on my own now, please," he announced, and then glanced over at Kon. "At least not take a bath with Damian."

"I can't believe you let that unworthy, filthy, sewer-rat bathe with me, father!" Damian yelled, and Bruce had sort of missed that yelling, as

opposed to incoherent, something-is-wrong-and-I-know-what-it-is-I-just-won't-tell-you baby yelling. He would miss being called baba though. It was sweet.

"In times of need, Damian, unusual things happen," Bruce said patiently, before taking a sip of his coffee. "You bathing with Tim is on the list of least terrible things to have happened to you as a child, I promise you."

Damian was still very pouty about the whole thing, but Bruce was just happy that Damian was back to being his own loud, abrasive self. He was still pretty small, too, which Bruce had forgotten. Soon, he'd hit his teens, and he'd take off in height. Talia was well above average in height, and he was maybe a little bit above average. There was no way he was going to remain this short for much longer. Bruce decided that this was the time to enjoy his small, angry son.

His big, angry son was arguing with Tim over something, just when Bruce saw, out of the corner of his eye, Stephanie and Cass come out of the med-bay part of the cave. Stephanie laughed at something Cassandra had said probably, before doing a double take in their general direction and startling.

"God, gross!" she exclaimed, loud enough to be heard across the cave. Cassandra followed her look, but didn't shout or anything, just raised her eyebrows a little bit at all of them, but that seemed to be enough for all of them to feel a little shame at their blatant nudity.

"Well that's encouraging, blondie," Jason exclaimed incredulously.

"Put on some pants, you heathens!" she shouted back, covering Cass' eyes with her one hand and her own with the other one. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"It's all Dick's fault," Tim declared and blushed as Stephanie made several grossed-out noises. "It's not like us naked is the weirdest thing you've ever seen!"

"What do you mean, *my fault*? The scheme worked, didn't it? They finally confessed their love for each other! I'll be getting thank-you cards from the entire JLA before the end of the week, when they realize I was the mastermind. Thank you, thank you very much," Dick said, as if that settled whatever argument Tim and Jason were having, bowing like the true preformer he was.

"Hmmm," Bruce said, but he wasn't really all that mad right now. He

could still feel where Clark had bitten his asscheek last night, and his back was pleasantly smoothed out by Clark's firm, insisting hands. He sipped his coffee. Bruce could retaliate, some way. Maybe he'd track down that boyfriend or girlfriend and put the fear in Batman of them. That'd teach Dick to mess around with his love-life.

"Well, I'm getting the fuck out of here, before Dick comes up with another scheme that makes me lose my pubes again," Jason snapped, and Roy snorted, tossing him a pair of pants.

"I'm ready to go when you are, Jaybird," he smirked. "But we're saying goodbye to Alfred before we go and that's final."

"Of course we are," Jason said incredulously, sounding annoyed as he hopped into the pants quickly.

"Memory gap checks, Jason," Bruce called distantly, and Jason froze up.

"Oh, it's so screwed up that I like that tone now. What the fuck. I'm going to *murder* you," he told Dick seriously as he poked the still fully-nude man in the chest, who only grinned sweetly.

"You wouldn't," he smirked. "You like me too much for that."

"Lies," Jason said with narrowed eyes, poking him in the chest again. Dick blew him a kiss and Jason growled, but Bruce grabbed his shoulder before he could try to tear Dick a new one.

"Don't make me spill my coffee, Jason," he said very calmly, but there was an underlying threat in his voice that both responded to, backing off a little. "Sit."

They lined up four chairs, and all of them were sat down in front of him in various states of undress. Tim was now wearing Kon's shirt and little else, Damian a pair of underwear and his own red hoodie, and Jason a pair of pants that were a few sizes too small, riding up to show his ankles and straining around his legs. Dick was in a pair of Bruce's cave-sweatpants, seeing as, surprise surprise, his own were gone.

"Right. What date is it?" Bruce asked as he put up his document of observations about the boys' state of mind on the batcomputer. Cassandra and Steph hopped up to sit on the panel next to his hand, but he couldn't really be bothered enough to care, and all of his children looked equally confused. Even Cass was making her uncertain

face.

"July?" Dick guessed.

"No, it's definitely September," Tim said incredulously.

"June," Jason said confidently.

"At least ask us something relevant, father," Damian said with an eye roll, pulling his legs up in the chair and flipping the hood over his head.

"Oh, boys. We're well into August," Bruce said, feeling a little concerned. "Seeing as neither of you knew the answer, it's obviously relevant, Damian. Tiny details matter."

"At least all guesses were summer-time," Stephanie pointed out, giving them encouraging grins.

"Did you even know that it was summer, Steph?" Jason snapped, and she snorted.

"I've been patrolling. Of course I know it's summer. It's *Gotham summer*, which makes it ten times worse than normal summer." That got her agreeing hums. Gotham summer was a smoggy, thick sort of heat, and would make the glue on their domino-masks practically dissolve. They could stand water and heat, sure, but Gotham summer and the sweat that came with it was on a whole other level.

"They wouldn't have known that before they were small either," Roy pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest where he stood in front of Jason's outstretched legs, poking at him with a toe. "At least not Jay or Dick."

"Hey," Dick said, sounding a little hurt. Jason only made a sour face.

"Yeah, Tim, buddy, you're great at everything except remembering anniversaries or dates of things that aren't crimes," Kon said patiently.

"That's not fair!" Tim said, crossing his arms over his chest with a pouty look on his face. "I so do."

"You gave me a Valentine's Day gift in March," Kon reminded him.

"Oh, *Timmy*, healthy relationships 101. Remember anniversaries. B, pay attention," Dick said incredulously, patting Tim's arm.

"Don't think just because you're tall again now, you're not still my kid, chum. I'll teach you a lesson," Bruce warned, and was flashed a surprisingly genuine grin. On young Dick's face, it was extremely rewarding, but now? With everything they'd gone through? It weighed heavier than all the gold in the world.

"See? This experience even revived some of Bruce's humor. This was *such* a good idea," Dick praised himself as Clark came down the stairs.

"Slow down there, hot-shot," Clark called, smiling despite himself. He was wearing a plain black shirt and a pair of Bruce's pajamapants that he never used. Bruce nearly tore his eyes away out of sheer reflex, but then remembered himself, and allowed his eyes to wander down over Clark's lovely torso to his perky ass. "Messing around with magic is never the answer."

"Except when it gets you laid," Jason said under his breath, and was elbowed in the ribs by Damian.

"Shut up, Todd. Can this cretin leave now?" Damian asked loudly.

"No. Quiet, all of you. When are your birthdays?" Bruce demanded, turning back away from Clark and making notes. All gave satisfactory answers. Bruce nodded to himself. "Please tell me you at least know the year," he halfway pleaded, and received positive answers there too. "Good. What's the one thing Alfred can't cook well?"

"American pancakes," all four said in unison.

"Why, I've never heard something as offensive in my life," came Alfred's mildly offended tone, and all boys' eyes widened. The old man stepped out of the shadows, eyebrows furrowed, and Steph snickered.

"Oooh, someone's gonna get it," she sing-songed, and Cassandra smiled secretively. A huge shadow jumped out from behind Alfred, attacking Damian in his chair and barking loudly.

"Down, Titus, down!" Damian laughed, immediately petting his dog and getting licked in the face. Bruce smiled to himself as Clark made his way over to the computerpanel. Titus happily ran around, getting petted by all four boys, even Jason, and Clark slid up behind Bruce, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him backwards so they were flush, back to chest. Alfred, seemingly pleased that they were all back to normal, disappeared back upstairs again.

"Good morning," Clark murmured. Bruce hummed, allowing himself

that moment of relaxation against Clark's warm front, until he steeled himself again.

"Hands off unless you want Damian to go for the green-K," he reminded him, and Clark reluctantly but quickly let go of him, and instead moved to stand beside him.

Finally, Titus settled between his master's legs, and Damian seemed slightly less guarded when he got to pet his dog. Bruce saw it as an opportunity to move on.

"How much do you remember of the night that you were turned into children?" Bruce questioned, and everyone got pensive looks.

"I remember Dick pinging me coordinates, which now makes more sense," Jason said angrily.

"I needed you there," Dick protested. "It wouldn't have been the same mess without ya, Jaybird."

"You shut up," Jason snapped.

"I remember swinging, and then a blue-purple light. I know that's sort of what a couple of our magicians' powers look like when they're using them. No villains, at least. Seems that information didn't make the cut," Tim declared to get Jason to shut up, and shooting Dick a glare.

"C'mon, we've had fun!" Dick complained. "I think you're all just being babies about this. Hah! Get it?" Stephanie groaned, and Roy disguised his laughter as a cough. Clark rolled his eyes with a smile, and Bruce internally wondered why his Robins had such a love for puns.

"Really Harper, you're gonna laugh at that?" Jason challenged, and Roy grinned at him, nudging his leg with a toe again.

"I thought it was funny. What'cha gonna do about it?" he challenged back, and Jason frowned at his friend.

"Damian?" Bruce prompted, and Damian looked up from his dog, frowning.

"I recall Todd being obnoxious, taking out a burglar, and Drake nearly slipping on the edge of a building as he swung to the next. Then the light." Damian looked a little nervous at that.

"It was a little creepy," Dick admitted. "But the rest was great! Right guys?" Tim landed a solid twack of a palm against his bare chest, and Dick let out a yelp, rubbing the sore spot with a shocked and betrayed look on his face.

"We had not one, but two, *two* dates planned during these past weeks, and the Titans had three team-exercises I've missed, along with God knows what in the corporate world!" Tim listed, obviously very annoyed.

"Diana did carry you around like you were her favorite child whilst you were wearing a dress and her tiara," Dick pointed out. Tim's eyes narrowed, and then he tipped his head from side to side, like he was weighing that argument on a scale, considering it.

"That was pretty awesome. She also helped me shoot Jason in the neck with a nerf-gun," he admitted reluctantly. "Also, I got to deck Jason so that he lost his breath."

"Seriously?" Kon grinned. Tim wrinkled his nose with how hard he was grinning.

"Yeah. That was sweet."

"Oh right! You dipshit, that was fucking rude! What'd I do to you?" Jason said a little defensively.

"Not only did you shove me in a mud-puddle, you convinced me to drive a plastic Barbie car off the *stairs*. What, you want me to make a longer list of what you've done to me? Because I will," Tim countered incredulously.

"Not only did you shove me in a mud-puddle, you convinced me to drive a plastic Barbie car off the *stairs*. What, you want me to make a longer list of what you've done to me? Because I will," Tim countered incredulously.

"Convinced *you*? You convinced *me*! Besides, you were just as mean to me!" Jason said incredulously.

"Boys," Bruce said firmly, and the two of them shut up, but glared at each other. "I take it that you three have a pretty good memory of how these two weeks went. What about you, Damian?"

"I seem to only have a vague memory. Mostly I recall Pennyworth feeding me, and Mother playing with me, and Cla-" He cut himself off,

and narrowed his eyes. Clark smiled at him.

"Me kissing you? I did that a fair bit," Clark agreed. "You were really sweet about it." Damian's face became blank, but his entire face was reddning, and the whole cave practically held it's breath, waited for him to explode. Even Titus looked up at Damian like he didn't know what to think.

"Can we still piggyback you? I mean, Tim's got his own kryptonian, but I feel like the rest of us are entitled now," Jason stated, glancing at Damian's reddning face out of the corner of his eye. Always one to break the tension with a joke. Clark's smile, that had fallen a little at Damian's apparent anger, widened again.

"Want to go for a fly, Jase?" he asked, and Jason got up out of his chair.

"Sit down," Bruce frowned. "Clark needs to take fewer people flying, not more. Would you say this has had a lasting effect on your personalities?"

"I don't think I've slept this much since I was, like, five years old, so I'm definitely feeling very recharged?" Tim said distantly. "Other than that, I don't think so, no."

"You wore dresses, Drake," Damian pointed out.

"So? They're comfortable and cute," Tim shrugged. "You could do with some dresses sometime, Dames. Especially now during the summer. Ball-sweat has never been less of a problem." Dick gave him a look like he was a genius, and even Jason seemed to take that into consideration.

"I'm not a girl," Damian said, a little derisively.

"And what's so bad about being a girl?" four voices said in near unison. Jason, Roy, Stephanie, and Clark. Damian's shoulders went up a little defensively. Bruce knew he still had tendencies to be unmodern in his approach to the world, but his siblings would not let him get away with it.

"Want me to show you how great it is being a girl, Dames? I'm sure Diana would assist me, Babs, Dinah, Kara, Ma Kent, Zatanna, Cass if she wasn't currently trying to fight the poison your *mom* gave her!" Stephanie hurried out while Damian was shocked.

"Oh yes, without a doubt," Clark agreed.

"You know better than to say shit like that, have you ever met your mother? It's like you don't even live in this house!" Jason said incredulously.

"I'm sure Artemis, Kori, Raven, Donna, Cissie, and Cassie wouldn't mind either," Roy added.

"Fine! Nothing wrong with it! God, can I leave?" Damian snarled, getting up on his feet again and glaring at Bruce.

"No. Sit," Bruce said calmly.

He ran them through basic questions: favorite colors, first flips they managed, first time they got grounded, and moved onto things that marked down their personalities. Finally, he was satisfied that the magic hadn't influenced their personalities, and they were free to leave.

"Thank god!" Jason said, standing up and stretching. "With you in my apartment, I bet it's a fucking mess."

"Hey, that's rude! I've just been sleeping in your bed, and eating your food, and doing your laundry. It looks fine," Roy said incredulously.

"We need to go grocery shopping, don't we?" Jason groaned.

"Lighten up, Jay."

"Yeah, at least you get to leave after all this," Tim frowned, remaining sitting seeing as he still had no underwear on.

"I'll take you to the Titans Tower if you can stand hanging out in Kansas for a while when I take my test," Kon promised. Tim's eyes widened, and he looked over at the clock quickly.

"Kon, your test starts in an hour!" Tim said incredulously.

"We have time for a quick shower, if you want to get all that Damian off of you," Kon pointed out. Tim bit his lip, and stood up, grabbing Kon's hand before disappearing over to the showers. Clark and Bruce ignored the whole exchange like they had no idea what was happening in those showers.

"Yes, well, that concludes our momentary confinement, and the clone and Todd can go away, right?" Damian said, frowning as he watched

them leave and unconsciously reaching his hands up towards Clark. Jason burst out laughing, and Damian did a double take, immediately flushing and grabbing one of his swords from seemingly nowhere. Clark had no clue when he'd managed to grab that in the first place.

"I'll rip out your spine with your ribs attatched and beat you to death with it before using it as a towel-rack, you insufferable, unimaginative imbecile!" Damian yelled, going after Dick, who politely caught the sword between his palms and kicked it out of his hands before hugging him tightly.

"Aw, come on Little D, it's adorable!" Dick crowed happily as Damian procceeded to try and beat the living shit out of him.

"Shouldn't we...?" Clark trailed off, nodding in their direction.

"If he takes it out on Dick, there will be less over for you," Bruce pointed out, and Clark winced. "Exactly."

"Was it weird?" Tim asked once they were in the shower, with Kon pressed up against the tiles behind him.

"A little, yeah. You were the cutest though," Kon laughed. The laugh turned into a bit of a moan when Tim nuzzled his neck and pressed firm kisses against his shoulders. They were teenagers, after all, who were regularly under pressure. Sex was a great way to relax, reassure yourself that you were both alive. Kon felt a little shaky with how much he wanted Tim, and was pretty embarrassed about it, really, but Tim was rubbing up against him like a particularly needy cat, so he wasn't alone in his struggles, at least.

"Yeah? Well I'm all grown up again now," he purred. "And I've missed you."

"I've been here a lot of the time," Kon pointed out, before Tim captured his lips in a kiss. Immediately, Kon wrapped his arms around his wet boyfriend, enjoying the warmth in the kiss. He'd been there, yeah, but there was a difference between tiny Tim and his Tim. Tiny Tim was adorable and clingy like a kid, while his Tim was thoughtful and sweet like his best friend and boyfriend. And while tiny Tim was amusing, he'd still sort of missed *his* Tim.

"Yeah, you have," Tim agreed, looking at him with those glowing blue eyes, that felt like they were seeing through him. "I appreciate that. It

was sweet of you."

"Mostly it was for blackmail purposes, so I mean- ow!" Kon laughed as Tim pinched his side.

"I'm trying to be nice and emotional here, asshole," Tim chided, that annoyed look on his face that Kon absolutely loved.

"Sorry, sorry," he grinned. "Please, continue praising me for being a decent boyfriend."

"Mmm. No, you ruined it," Tim sighed, and Kon pouted, pressing a few more kisses to Tim's lips, tugging him closer under the spray. He'd really missed that.

After a nice minute or two of making out, Tim released his lips to tip his head back and get his hair wet. Kon swallowed as he watched a few drops of water trail all the way down Tim's torso, and he rubbed his thumbs over Tim's lovely hipbones.

"Guess I don't need to track Alfred down to see your baby pictures anymore," Kon laughed a little awkwardly, and Tim tipped his head forward again just to roll his eyes at him.

"Ha ha, very funny," he said very sarcastically, grabbing Kon's ass and making the other teen squeak.

"Dude," Kon said, a little wide-eyed. "They're right outside!"

"Yeah," Tim agreed, pressing kisses all the way down Kon's torso as he sank to his knees. "Better keep it down then, huh Kon?"

"*Jesus fucking-*"

Chapter End Notes

Our birds are big again! However, there WILL be another chapter! At least one more, possibly two if I have too many emotions about everything (probably two then). Thank you so much for your continued sweetness and awesomeness, and all the love Damian is getting!! He fricking deserves it and needs it desperately. Honestly, this whole fic has been such a wild ride, I absolutely love hearing from all of you!!! Thank you so much for reading and being amazing!! <3<3<3

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred was adamant that Roy and Jason at least stay for lunch. Tim he let slip, if only because he knew he'd get fed by Martha Kent the moment they got to Kansas. Dick stayed by his own free will. After his wrestling match with Damian, the eleven-year-old had disappeared somewhere in the manor, and he thought he'd stick around, try to apologize and see what it was that had made Damian so mad.

He peeked into Damian's room, not really expecting to find him there, but feeling the need to at least check it out. As he'd expected, no Damian there. He really didn't think he'd be this pissed. Maybe he'd check with Alfred if he'd gone on a run with Titus or something. Wouldn't be too shocking. The cave was still pretty crowded, and he'd want the space.

As Dick started down the hall, aiming for the kitchen, he heard a soft thud and a curse coming from one of the bedrooms. Jason's. He knocked, and opened the door to peek in.

"You alright?" he inquired, as he saw Jason sitting on the bed, rubbing his forehead. At the sight of him, Jason's eyes narrowed.

"What do you want, Dick-face?" he asked. Dick shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets. Alfred had presented him with jeans and a sweater when they'd emerged from the cave. Dick had even managed to sneak a hug from the old man, who'd chuckled at him and gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

Jason was wearing Roy's hoodie that he'd worn when he'd shown up today, and still the too-small pants.

"Just walked by and heard you grunt. Did you hit something?" Dick asked as he strolled a little into the room, keeping his posture casual and calm. Jason always responded to the slightest tension by lashing out.

"Pants too tight," Jason muttered, and pulled on them again, annoyed.

"I've probably got pants here you can borrow," Dick suggested helpfully, but Jason just gave him a scornful look.

"Your skinny jeans, Mick Jagger? No thanks. That'd be even worse," Jason said, flashing his teeth in an angry grin. Dick rolled his eyes at him.

"Just trying to be helpful."

"Yeah, well, you're not," Jason snapped at him. Dick's scrunched up face smoothed out, and he slowly and carefully leaned against one of the bedposts. With their backs turned and with their focus on each other, they didn't notice Bruce walking by, about to grab Jason for lunch. Instead of interrupting, however, he merely froze in the doorway, silent, still, waiting.

"You alright, Jaybird?" he asked softly, his voice filled with tenderness.

"'M fine, Dick," Jason sighed, sounding tired as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"I didn't think you'd hate it that much. You got to do a bunch of things you missed, right? Things older, manlier you never would've let yourself do otherwise."

"Shut the fuck up," Jason said, but there wasn't the usual bite to it. Bruce considered that, and leaned against the doorframe. Both of their looks snapped up, and immediately Jason's eyes narrowed, and Dick's widened. Two different tactics: with Jason, it was hatred, and with Dick, innocence.

Bruce sort of appreciated that. Both playing to their strengths.

"Lunch is ready," he said quietly, watching his oldest sons. Dick pulled his hands out of his pockets to slap them together and rub.

"Great! Has anyone found Damian yet?" he asked as Jason slowly stood up, watching Bruce through his narrowed eyes like Bruce would snap at him any second.

"No. I think you might have driven him into hiding with embarrassment," Bruce told him in no uncertain words, and Dick gaped at him. "No time for that now, anyway. Lunch. Alfred won't like if we're late."

"Yeah, taking time to find your kid, that's always too much work, isn't it?" Jason asked lowly, standing up to face him. Dick sucked in a breath through his teeth, and glanced over at Bruce like he might have to break up a fist-fight. Bruce felt his anger flare, like it always, *always* did when Jason decided to punch his bruises rather than poke.

However, Bruce held the enormous power over him that was baby-pictures, and he thought about young Jason looking up at Diana like she'd hung the moon in the sky, and made himself calm down.

"What is it you want me to say? That I'm a horrible father? Fine. I'm a horrible father. Would you like to do a better job and go find Damian for me?" Bruce tossed back casually, meeting his teal-blue eyes and seeing the anger there again, the one that hadn't been nearly as prevalent in ten-year-old Jason's.

At the way both of their jaws dropped a little, Bruce could tell he'd surprised them. Honestly, he just didn't want them to get any blood on the nice carpets.

"Didn't think so," he said simply, and turned to leave. "Food. Downstairs. Now."

Clark was already seated, chatting awkwardly with Roy, who looked entirely too amused with the whole situation. The rest of them sat down, and Stephanie came into the room, helping Cass shuffle to her seat. Jason pulled out her chair for her with his foot, and Cass thanked him by twirling the bright white streak in his hair around her finger and smiling at him. Jason reluctanly smiled back as Alfred entered the room to serve them.

"Where's Master Damian?" Alfred asked primly when he was standing behind Bruce to serve him.

"In hiding. Save some food for him," he replied.

"Ah, of course. Would be too much to ask for the lot of you to show up for lunch," Alfred muttered as he disappeared back into the kitchen. Clark muffled his snicker in his hand, but Bruce noticed, and narrowed his eyes at him.

"Sorry, B. I just..." He looked over at Stephanie shoving a bread-piece in Dick's mouth to shut him up, Roy and Jason laughing about something, Cassandra smiling at them, and leaned closer to Bruce. Bruce leaned closer at him too. "You've got really, really great kids. No matter their ages. You're a lucky guy."

Bruce stared at the genuine smile on his face, the softness in his eyes, and blinked in surprise.

"Yes," he agreed slowly, placing his hand on top of Clark's on the table. "Very lucky."

Clark glanced at the hand on his, and turned his own around to give Bruce's a squeeze. He smiled at the man next to him, and Bruce offered a small, but genuine smile of his own that made Clark's heart flutter.

Lucky indeed.

After lunch, Bruce and Clark took a trip up to the Watchtower, attending a brief meeting and updating Diana. She was simultaneously a little disappointed but pleased to hear that the boys were back to normal, and asked them to wish the boys well.

No speedsters approached Batman during the whole time he was on the tower to test him, but he enjoyed putting Green Lantern to the test with the new recruits and junior members. Whilst he stood silently, watching as Green Lantern constructed a trampoline to catch Blue Beetle and rescue him from getting crushed against the wall from Supergirl's throw, Green Arrow approached him, standing next to him silently.

Bruce assumed it was about the picture he sent of Roy. Oliver cleared his throat, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. Bruce waited.

"So, uh. What was he doing with you? Oliver finally asked after almost a full minute of silence.

"Assisting on a case," Bruce replied. All of his kids had enough blackmail material on each other now that them turning into children probably wouldn't get out just yet, and it *was* a case, of sorts.

"The one you needed Zatanna on?" he questioned, and Bruce gave a short nod. "Right. Yeah. Finding the highest ground, huh?" There was a wistful note in his tone, and Bruce didn't reply. "What was that he was on?"

"Jungle gym."

"New exercises?"

"Testing something new," Batman agreed. Oliver nervously smoothed a gloved hand over his beard, a gesture he associated with thinking about his family situations. Oliver's dad had had the same nervous gesture when he was still alive and talking about his playboy son to the press.

The best thing about being at the Watchtower as Batman was that nobody really expected him to talk. Batman was a shadow, in stark contrast to the bright lights on the Watchtower, and the only one who ever expected him to have a real conversation with him was Clark, but that was now more clear why. However, as he stands there, he reflects on the angry look on older Jason's face he saw earlier today, how relaxed he became when in other's company.

Whilst he was pretty sure Dinah had never acted like a mother to Roy, he knew that they got along well, along with Dinah loving his daughter. He wondered if Ollie had even met the little Lian Harper that Jason seemed to adore, from what little he'd heard.

"It's not too late to reconnect with him," he forced out, because if there was anything he'd learned in the past two weeks, it was that interpersonal relationships were oddly flexible and could take whatever shape you'd let them. Talia could be simultaneously one of his worst enemies and someone he had fondness for; Clark could simultaneously be one of the most frustrating people on the planet and one of the few who he could be himself with; and so on.

Oliver looked like he'd been slapped in the face, and turned to face him fully, up in Bruce's face like he did when he felt cornered and angry. Batman wasn't intimidated, just annoyed with himself for bringing it up right now, when he had a manor to get back to. He was pretty sure Jason and Roy had seen themselves out by now, but he still had an errant kid to find before nighttime, and he still hadn't managed to scold Dick with the full force that he should have.

"You know *nothing* about that. Keep your pointy ears out of my business," Green Arrow growled, finger out to poke his chest without actually connecting with the chestplate.

"Know nothing?" Batman mused. "No, I know exactly what happened. I know that you made a mistake, but you're too proud to own up to it, and you're too stubborn to let anyone know. You were an idiot-"

"Shut up!"

"-yes, but it's time to be less of an idiot now, and attempt to fix what

you broke."

"Coming from you? That's rich," Ollie snapped angrily, looking entirely ready to punch him in the nose. With how angry he looked, it was entirely probable that Ollie would do it. Batman looked back out at the juniors, and noticed how slow their motions were, the fact that Supergirl's head was cocked a little bit to the side. Supers and their head-tilts. Even GL was making it look like he really wasn't listening to their conversation, when he very obviously was.

Without answering, Batman turned and walked down the hall to the left, headed for the nearest room without any other occupants. No need to interrupt their training exercise.

"Hey! I'm not done with you!" Green Arrow exclaimed incredulously and came after him down the hall. Bruce stepped into the small conference room and to the side, waiting until Ollie was in the room to close the door behind them.

"I assumed so, from the running and the yelling," he agreed, crossing his arms over his chest. Internally, he regretted starting this conversation, but knew that Oliver would try to threaten him until they hashed it out enough that he felt satisfied.

"You have no right, no business-" Oliver began, spinning around to face him, and Bruce rolled his shoulders just enough to let the cape curl back so Oliver could see his crossed arms over his chest.

"He may have grown out of the need for a mentor and a wing to be taken under," he said slowly, cutting Oliver off without remorse, "but he has not outgrown the need for a father-figure or someone to keep him on his feet."

Oliver stared in silence for a while, unblinking, and then he bit down on his lower lip.

"How would you know? I did fine without a dad at that age. So did you. Sort of," the archer pointed out, a little less anger in his tone and a lot more land-mines.

"I have five kids, Ollie," Bruce said, a little exasperated. "Have had a falling-out with four out of those five. Trust me on this."

"Sounds like you're the last one I should be trusting," Ollie muttered petulantly, crossing his arms over his chest as well, and standing up a little straighter. Bruce rolled his eyes behind the white-out lenses, and

exhaled a very silent sigh.

"My point," he began, "was that you could both benefit from reconciling. As you've pointed out, it's not my business, but as Roy has been in my general vicinity a lot lately, it's been on my mind."

"You're sure arguing hard for it being none of your business," Oliver spat.

"I'm not trying to argue with you, Oliver," Bruce exhaled, running out of fucks to give. He wasn't even following his own advice in this instance, not for lack of trying. "I'm just stating observations and opinions and intuitions and... Past experiences. One day, you will regret doing nothing."

They stared at each other, probably meeting eyes without seeing it through white-out lenses, and then Oliver's shoulder's relaxed minutely.

"One day? Yeah..." he finally said a little distantly, and Bruce internally nodded to himself, before exiting the conference room and leaving Green Arrow and the Watchtower behind.

His next monitor-shift was supposed to be today, but Diana said she'd cover for him if Bruce sent her pictures of Jason with his toy lasso, and Bruce hadn't been out on a proper patrol for almost two weeks. He made the trade before taking his jet back down to Earth.

When he got back to Gotham, Bruce checked in on Cassandra in the medbay. She told him Damian was somewhere in the cave, but wouldn't say where, saying he was supposed to be a *detective*, if he could be outsmarted by an eleven-year-old, he wasn't all that good, now was he?

When Bruce had taken the suit off, and taken a quick shower, he strolled over to the batcomputer, and sat down in one of the computer chairs. He sighed a little to himself, turned the monitors on, and leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"Come down and talk, Damian," he stated. There was a moment of silence before there was a shift above him, the movement coming from the top of the monitor. After a moment, Bruce could see Damian's forehead and green-looking eyes peeking out over the screen in the darkness above him. "Good hiding place."

"What gave me away?" Damian asked suspicously after another moment of silence. "Nothing. I just know you," he said, smiling a little as the boy's eyes narrowed. Because while he'd been a toddler recently, Bruce kept forgetting that Damian wasn't an actual teenager yet, still just a boy and still growing and learning and adapting.

Damian's head disappeared behind the monitor again, and after a few seconds, he emerged from underneath the desk, rolling out and stepping away from Bruce.

"You missed lunch," Bruce pointed out, and felt his insides twist a little angrily at how that came out demanding, like Damian had disappointed him, made him angry. He hadn't. Bruce had been a little worried, honestly. "I mean. Dick missed you." Oh, guilt, *much* better.

"What Grayson wants is none of my concern," Damian sneered, crossing his arms and coming up to stand next to him.

"You're going to have to forgive him sometime," Bruce pointed out. Damian's temper on this issue was a little bit of a mystery to him. Sure, he would consider it embarrassing to be coddled like a baby, but so had the other boys. Maybe Damian just wasn't as used to it as the other boys had become. Bruce had no doubt Damian would eventually forgive Dick again, if only because he valued their partnership.

"No," Damian said firmly. Well. Maybe not yet, but soon enough, he'd forgive him.

"You can be mad at him for as long as you'd like, but will that make you feel any better?"

"*Yes*," he said vehemently. Bruce smiled a little secretively at all the passion this little boy carried within him. He just needed somewhere to channel it, and Robin seemed to be a pretty good outlet for him.

"Anger is a double-edged sword, and it generally cuts the one who wields it the deepest," Bruce quoted at him. Damian frowned a little angrily.

"I'm not forgiving him!" he almost shouted, and Bruce sighed a little.

"Again, if that will make you feel better, go on for as long as you'd like. However, being able to tell him why what he did upset you is much more rewarding for both of you," Bruce wheedled. His little pouty eleven-year-old pouted further, and Bruce was just about to ask him if he wanted some of the lunch left-overs, he must be hungry,

when Damian interrupted him.

"So you're dating the alien now?" he asked sharply, the frown still firmly set on his face. Bruce felt a pang in his chest as he realized it might be a while before he saw Damian smile again. Baby Damian was pretty easy with them, but eleven-year-old Damian held his emotions close to his chest. Something he was probably genetically predisposed to and if not, conditioned into.

"Clark," Bruce reminded him, just to have the time to think about how to reply to that.

"Whatever. I can't believe you, of all people, would do that."

"Do what?" Bruce challenged, turning to face Damian in his chair, still sitting down. He was afraid that if he stood up, they'd start yelling at each other, and he was too goddamn tired of yelling at Damian and getting yelled at back. "Be with a man?"

"Spit in mother's face like that." At Bruce's raised eyebrow, Damian pressed his lips together a little nervously before forcing them back into a frown. "I remember my whole time as an infant," Damian explained, his green eyes looking up at Bruce. Not very odd with Damian, really, the boy wasn't further up than to Bruce's waist. The thing that stood out was the tone, and the look in his eyes. His hands clenched a little and he leaned back against the computerpanel, a forced show of casualness. "About... About what happened with mother."

Bruce sighed deeply, and considered how to approach that.

"Do you remember what we said?" Bruce asked. He needed more information than that. Damian uncrossed his arms again, probably seeing the nervous, protective gesture for what it was, and Bruce wanted to force his hands back up, let him have that. Damian's usually proud frown turned into a wobbly straight line.

"That... You could never be together again," he said slowly. Bruce sighed, and stood up to place a hand on Damian's shoulder, reassuring. This was no longer a possible-yelling situation.

"You know us both. Do you think we could ever work as a couple?"

"I don't know any couples," he said petulantly. Bruce was painfully reminded how young Damian was again, and in a moment of weakness, pulled him into his side, rubbing very small, barely

noticable circles on his back.

"You know Dick and Barbara. They were a couple."

"They're not currently one?" Damian questioned.

"No. Dick has a boyfriend," Bruce said.

"How do you know?" Damian accused immediately, and Bruce blinked. He didn't really want to say. He really didn't want to mention how he knew to *Damian*. It wasn't so much the very slight limping as the fact that Dick always lit up when he had someone to love and devote himself to. It was also the quick phone checks when he was out on patrol, the private smiles when he was on the phone with someone. Barbara teased Dick on comms, but not on the same degree as she would've if they were still together, and they hadn't visited each other for a month and a half, at least.

"Trust me," Bruce said instead. "Think about Barbara and Dick when they were in a relationship. Could you ever imagine me and your mother that way?"

Damian pursed his lips in thought. That look was all Talia's. Everyone at society parties always nagged that Damian looked just like a mini-him, but Bruce saw more of his mother in him than he saw himself. The jaw, the chin, that might be him, but the eyes, the hands, the way he held himself, he couldn't take credit for that.

"I don't think mother would have the patience for you," Damian decided. Bruce huffed out a laugh.

"You think that would be our only issue?" he questioned.

"That, and the killing," Damian added. Bruce squeezed his son's shoulder, and Damian looked back up at him.

"I loved Talia very very much at one point, and she loved me back. But... We're not the same people we were back then anymore. I can't... ever see myself going back to her."

Damian nodded, but his lower lip wobbled a little again, and Bruce felt a bit lost. He couldn't really give Damian any false reassurances. His kid was too smart and their relationship was too reliant on them telling the truth for him to do that. Out of all of his children, Damian was still the one that really threw him for a loop. You'd think it was Jason, but Jason was predictable in his hatred and he always went for

whatever was exposed. Damian wasn't like that. Damian was... complicated. How did you tell a child that their parents would never be together again? Did you apologize?

"Please give Clark a chance," was what came out of his mouth when he tried to come up with reassurances. Carefully weighed words, and Damian was unpredictable enough that he might snarl about it, or simply agree.

Damian considered that for a moment, arms now back to being crossed tight, Bruce's arm still wrapped around his shoulders, shoulders that carried too much weight for his young age.

"We'll see," Damian said finally, and Bruce ruffled his hair.

"Good," he said. *Thank you, I'm sorry, you deserve better, you should have had better, you landed the worst genes in the world*, were all thoughts running through his mind as he and his son met eyes, but none of it left his mouth.

That was on him, at least. With toddler-Damian, he would've been able to apologize, maybe not be understood, but have it off his chest; now though, when Damian was much more aware of their complicated relationship, and the weight of his words, he couldn't make himself say it. The outcome was unpredictable, Damian wouldn't just wave him off and asked to be picked up in a whiny voice, he could go either way, agreeing with him or defending himself, and both would lead to arguments Bruce couldn't have with him.

However, now, as they looked at each other, Bruce could feel a sense of peace between them. Damian was huffy, but they weren't at each other's throats. He could squeeze Damian's shoulder without the other tossing it off, accepting the affection. They'd come a far way from where they'd been in the beginning. One day, they'd get there, and Bruce could tell his son exactly how sorry he was.

"I suppose you want me to apologize to Grayson for attacking him," the boy said reluctantly, pulling Bruce out of his thoughts.

"Not this time," he replied, and Damian's head whipped up to look at him in surprise. Bruce smiled a little. "He had it coming this time." The grin he got back was all his, mischevious and smug, without an ounce of Talia in it. Surprising, but it filled his chest with something warm and fond. "However, I doubt he'll let you get out of talking about it."

"Blah. Why does he always have to talk about things?" Damian said

distastefully, and Bruce huffed out a laugh, ruffling his kid's hair and enjoying the little wrinkle of his childish button-nose.

"Someone has to, or this house would explode with all the feelings under pressure in here!" Dick exclaimed from above them on a staircase. He flipped down the stairs, and Damian's frown grew as he approached them. "Wanna sparr with me, Lil' D?"

"Don't call me that," Damian scowled, but snuck underneath Bruce's arm and walked toward the sparring mats. Dick shot him a grin before hopping after him, and Bruce crossed his arms as he watched them go. Dick poked Damian in the side, laughing at something, and Damian swatted him off, tackling him onto the sparring mats when they came close enough. Bruce smiled a little secretively, allowing himself that.

"Was all well at the Watchtower, Master Bruce?" came Alfred's voice from behind him, and Bruce, the Batman, the Shadow of the Night, nearly jumped in shock.

"Fine," Bruce said, keeping his voice even as he turned his head enough to see Alfred coming up to stand next to him. "Did Jason and Roy leave yet?"

"Yes, Master Jason and Mister Harper left soon after you and Master Clark did. Master Richard has expressed interest to stay the night and patrol with the two of you, and Master Timothy has informed me he's staying with the Titans over the weekend," Alfred reported. "Lucius Fox has telephoned, looking for his crash-test dummies, and there is a charity-gala happening next Wednesday, which the invitation for arrived yesterday."

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday then?" Bruce questioned.

"You had other things on your mind, Master Bruce," Alfred said, the slightest twitch to the corner of his mouth indicating his smile. "I didn't see it fit to trouble you with it."

"Hmmm."

"Shall I set out a plate for Master Clark at dinner, Sir?" the butler asked perfectly innocently, and Bruce glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, with his eyes narrowed.

"...Yes."

"And is he staying the night? Shall I make up an extra room for him?"

Bruce refused to feel embarrassed by Alfred's question. Yes, he was well aware he was just being teased, but he would not let Alfred have too much fun.

"...No," he muttered, and the butler gave a brisk nod.

"Of course, Master Bruce. We shall be having zereshk polow morgh for dinner, to make Master Damian appear at the table," Alfred sniped, but with care. Bruce knew he was just annoyed Damian had missed a meal. The boy was growing, Alfred always argued, as he stuffed him with nutritious foods. Bruce appreciated it.

"Sounds good," he agreed. "When should I tell Clark to come over?"

"Whenever he pleases," Alfred smiled at him. Bruce narrowed his eyes at him, and the butler let out a little chuckle. "Honestly, Master Bruce, I'm just overjoyed you've found each other finally."

"Hrm. Can you give Cassandra a brief checkover before you go?"

"Certainly, Master Bruce," the older man agreed, before disappearing into the medbay. Bruce picked his phone up, scrolling to his and Clark's texts.

tread lightly when you come over, my butler wants to kidnap you and hold you prisoner

In a moment, Clark replied.

With his cooking and your company, I think I'd be fine with that

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Chapter End Notes

next to last chapter!! I did indeed have too many emotions, and it would've gotten awkwardly long if I squished it, so you get one more chapter after this! Thank you so so much for all of your encouragement and sweet comments, it's really making my whole life better than ever, I love and cherish all of you. Thank you!!! Hope you enjoyed! <3<3

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By dinnertime, Damian and Dick had settled their differences, because Damian allowed Dick to ruffle his hair and only kicked him once under the table when they sat down. Clark and Dick made comfortable conversation through dinner, they had after all known each other as long as Bruce and Clark had known each other, except in a different capacity. Damian was pretending like Clark wasn't there most of the time. When he wasn't doing that, he was listening to Bruce's and Clark's conversations, obviously trying to gauge their intimacy-levels. Bruce was sort of proud of him for that, really.

After dinner, he went down to the cave, helped Cassandra stretch a bit, and discussed a few cases with Stephanie. She wasn't his sharpest detective, that prize went to Tim or Barbara, but she was definitely good enough for it, if only she'd put her mind to it.

As soon as Stephanie had given up on trying to solve a case, she went to the training equipment on the lower levels of the cave to beat some frustration out before patrol. It was never good to go out when you were too angry, Bruce had learned very quickly, and tried to pass on to his kids.

Of course, his prodigies didn't like listening to him unless he was teaching them how to execute a new move, but he'd gotten through to a few of them, at least. Stephanie was one of them.

He remained by the batcomputer, ticking off problem-areas he was going to visit on his first patrol out in a while. He'd definitely been down longer, but this was a different sort of down-time, for everyone.

There was the sound of someone whistling a happy tune and steps in the staircase leading up to the house. Bruce noticed when they were passing behind him, and turned his chair around to, as he'd assumed, see Dick skipping toward the staircase going down to the bikes, which were currently on lockdown, with a happy smile on his face.

"Dick?" Bruce called, and Dick froze, spinning around on the spot and offering Bruce a very innocent smile, giving Bruce a bit of a déjà vu

back to around two weeks ago, when Damian had been hammering on his breastplate and yelling about cocoa.

"What, B?" he asked sweetly.

"I am not done with you," he announced firmly. Dick pulled a face, but strolled over to him, still with a skip in his step.

"Well, I'm not gonna apologize, because it was awesome, Tim was adorable, Clark was adorable, and you loved it like all hell," Dick said without even flinching. Bruce glared at him, and Dick stared back, slightly smiling even though he had Batman staring him down. Damn his Robins and becoming immune to his glares.

"Magic is unpredictable. You know that very well. You risked not only your own life, but your brothers' as well," Bruce said, voice hard as steel.

"Zatanna and I talked it over a lot before we actually went through with it. I'm not an idiot," Dick protested, crossing his arms over his chest and canting one hip out gracefully.

"Two more years 'accidentally' wiped off, and Damian would be dead now," Bruce said sharply. Dick's lips curled into a little frown.

"Like I said, I'm not an idiot. And Zatanna is a very capable magician. I had all the faith in the world in her, and that she knew what she was doing," the young man soothed. "She didn't mess up, is the point."

"That is *not* the point. The point is, you did something with potentially immense consequences and you can't just laugh it off."

"*Potentially* immense consequences. You seem to be getting stuck on that. Nothing bad happened! Except for the Talia thing, but y'know, that one's on you, sort of."

"*Excuse* me?" Bruce said dangerously, and Dick waved him off.

"You're just pissed because I interfered with your previously non-existent private life," Dick told him, and Bruce almost gaped incredulously at his kid's nerve.

"I'll have you know I have dates lined up all over my calendar," he protested.

"Yeah, because that's *so* satisfying, having a lot of dates with people

you don't even really wanna talk to. No, I know you've had your eyes on Clark for a while, but you do that thing, the thing where you don't think you deserve any sort of love or affection from anyone who isn't your butler, and so you just... Box it up and sweep it under the carpet," Dick accused. "Now all of those dates are with *Clark*, the guy you actually want to be going out with, and the rest of the world thanks me for finally getting you to suck it up and talk to each other."

Bruce was silent, contemplating. He wouldn't give Dick the satisfaction of agreeing out loud, but Dick seemed to take his silence as the same thing as agreeing.

"Speaking of, Clark was an unpredictable variable," Bruce pointed out after a few moments.

"Not really. You didn't wonder at how Clark showed up just when we turned into kids? After not managing to make it over for like two weeks?" Dick questioned.

"You called him then?" Bruce said, a little resigned. Yes, he should have noticed, but even he, the one with all back-up plans and all the premonitions, didn't think Dick would really go through with something so half-assed.

"Earlier in the day, yeah, asking if he'd seen you lately, since you weren't replying to my messages, and since you actually weren't replying to his non-JL related messages because of that mission recently when he pissed you off, wham bam, he's here, and we charmed the ass off of him and he wouldn't leave."

"Your plan had so many different aspects that were unpredictable and undefinable," Bruce pointed out incredulously. "And yet you went through with it?"

"Well, Clark is your best friend," Dick pointed out, as if that explained everything. "He sticks with you through thick and thin. I know he'd want to help you, and you'd be reluctant, but Alfred has, y'know, acknowledged that when he and Clark are two-timing you, it's way easier to convince you to do something, and so he'd let him stay and help. Especially if he thought it would help you handle us. Would *you* ever have gone through with it?"

"Your plan? God no," Bruce said, practically sweating just at the thought of "winging it" like Dick had. Especially when there was magic involved. You should never be flying by the seat of your pants when there was magic being cast over several people.

"Exactly," Dick said proudly. "I outsmarted Batman, and eliminated years of UST!"

"I'd say that's giving you too much credit," Bruce said in a deadpan, and Dick flashed him a grin.

"See, I've been dreaming about this since we first met Superman for real," he said happily, obviously very pleased with himself. Bruce blinked at that.

"Really." Not a question, but it was hard to deter Dick from talking when he really wanted to. Admittedly, this was one of the longer conversations they'd had in a while. Bruce had been busy with the Mission, and Damian being his usual difficult-to-understand self, and the JL, and had probably shrugged Dick off a few times. It was something Alfred kept telling him to stop doing. He really wasn't the best at reaching out to people. Best prolong this conversation as much as possible.

"Really really."

"I think it's just your personal wish to have Clark as your dad, which is why you're projecting all of this onto me," Bruce teased, and Dick actually grinned at him.

"Nah. I'm not the one making you all lovey-dovey with Clark. That's all you two, au naturel."

"Hrm. How's Wally?" Speaking of best friends. Bruce hadn't asked Wally to come, mostly for his own sanity, but also because he wasn't sure if that was the boyfriend or not. Like he said, he hadn't been paying attention to interpersonal relationships all that much lately.

"Good. Why?" Dick replied. His voice was neutral enough that Bruce didn't know if he had something to hide or if Wally genuinely was good. This was always a dance they did whenever Dick was feeling particularly like he deserved a private life. Entirely uncalled for, *especially* now.

"Wouldn't he be worried when you were gone over two weeks without saying why?" Bruce inquired.

"He knew what I was doing," Dick shrugged. This explained the lack of Flash-related accidents in Bruce's proximity lately. Better stay away from the bat than be close when you had a secret to keep.

"And all the other magicians I contacted?"

"I talked to most of them, telling them to not help you if you asked, but the others were seriously busy. According to Zatanna, they'd be able to tell it was her magic from half a mile away, for some magicky reason. You know how it is when you try to get magicians to explain their tricks," he grinned with a shrug.

"I have more magical contacts than you know about," Bruce pointed out. Dick shrugged.

"I took a gamble, and it worked. You do that all the time," he accused.

"Not with magic."

"*Especially* with magic!" Dick exclaimed, shaking his head. "Now, my only regret was Talia showing up. I didn't think she'd find out, since I figured you'd have us on lockdown. What'd she say, anyway?"

"The usual. Grandiose promises which I have no reason to want or trust," Bruce relayed. The corner of his mouth quirked a bit as he thought back to little Dick trying to escape Clark to go after her. "You were... enthusiastic about punching her in the face."

Dick scoffed.

"When aren't I?"

"When Damian's involved," Bruce pointed out. Dick's pursed lips moved side to side in thought.

"He deserves better. Kid's got enough family issues," he finally admitted, giving Bruce a bit of a pointed look. They locked eyes in silence for a moment. Dick's eyes were still the same sort of clear, wonderfully bright blue as they'd always been. Bruce had never really intended for all of them to come out dark-haired and blue-eyed. Damian was teetering on the edge with his green, and Jason's had taken on a greener quality after being thrown in a Lazarus Pit, but Dick really looked a distressing amount like him, the eyes especially.

"He does," Bruce agreed. "I've asked him to give Clark a chance."

"He'll warm up to him," Dick reassured. "And if he doesn't, well. Clark is one dedicated boyfriend, is what I've heard from Lois anyway, and he will try to make Damian like him until his dying breath. I mean, it might take a while, but he'll come around eventually."

"What if we break up before then?" Bruce asked, practically reflexively. It was a possible outcome of their relationship, very probable even. He was... aware that he was emotionally unavailable, but they had work, superhero duties, several children as well. Clark would probably give up sometime, realize that Bruce wasn't worth it, leave him. Not unlikely at all.

"Hah! No. That's not happening," Dick said with such certainty, it hurt Bruce's heart a little. He was glad not all of his kids had turned out as cynical as him.

"Why not?"

Dick uncrossed his arms and shifted his weight from foot to foot, always moving, never entirely still. It was an endearing quality as a child, but as an adult, it was usually seen as annoying. Bruce had always found it a sort of grounding point. There were a few things he knew for absolute certain: he did the right thing in becoming Batman, he would never regret taking any of his kids in, Alfred knows best, and Dick Grayson cannot stand still.

"When it's real, you just know, y'know? I've been with you forever, B," Dick said, looking entirely sincere and hopeful. "I know you pretty damn well. I also know Clark pretty damn well. I've been in a lot more long-term, real, loving relationships than you have, B. Trust the one with the greater authority."

"Greater authority, huh?" he said with narrowed eyes. Dick smiled at him, winking. Hmmm. "I thought it was... *real*, with Talia."

"Yeah, but now *I'm* here to tell you exactly why that's an awful, awful, terrible, no-good idea!" he beamed, clapping his hands together and rubbing them against each other. "Except I gotta go back to Bludhaven for like a day. I'm probably out of sick days, and my partner's definitely gonna wanna beat my ass for not calling her."

"You informed magicians I *might* contact, but not your own partner? If it was me who did that, you'd be so angry you wouldn't even speak to me without yelling," Bruce scoffed at him.

"Yes, yes, I'm a hypocrite, sue me," Dick said, holding his hands up as he walked backwards towards the stairs. "Tell stepdad Clark I said bye."

"He's not-" Bruce began, and cut himself off at Dick's smile as he slid down the bannister and hopped over to straddle one of the bikes. He

wouldn't consider Clark their stepdad, what with the two of them initiating their deepened relationship less than twenty-four hours ago, but Dick had apparently been wanting to say that for a while. Fine. "Be back for patrol tomorrow. You've been in another body for over two weeks. You're not patrolling on your own."

"Wow," Dick said in astonishment as Bruce walked over to the bannister, leaning on it and gazing down at his oldest. "I've been twenty-four for less than twelve hours, and already it's like I'm back to living under your roof."

"Dick," Bruce said warningly, dragging his name out, and the young man rolled his eyes, grabbing one of the helmets off the platform.

"Yeah, yeah, safety and stuff, I know, I need to get used to being back to normal. Fine. As long as I can toss in my laundry whilst we go out."

"I don't do the laundry. Give it to Alfred, he'll fix it."

"Sweet," Dick agreed, pulling the helmet over his head and flicking down the visor. It was one of the more discrete bikes, silvery and jet-black, but without anyone's insignia. He started the bike with a smooth purr of the engine, and Bruce tapped his fingers against the metal of the bannister a little nervously, something he wouldn't have done if Dick was paying attention.

"See you tomorrow," the older man called over the rumble echoing through the cave, and Dick tossed a hand up in a salute before the platform began turning, angling the bike towards the exit. He took off like a shot out through the tunnels, and left Bruce alone in the cave, save for the bats and the patient in the med-bay.

Patrol that night was like taking a gasp of fresh air after being held underwater. Bruce could breathe again when he had the cowl on again, could think more clearly, could feel good and strong. He was inside of his fortress, protected so that he could protect others, which was what he took care of most of the time that night. Petty crimes, getting their feet back under themselves.

Damian was bored, of course, because those criminals could never put up much of a fight, but he did acknowledge, after a lot of arguing, that they couldn't just immediately bounce back from a full-body transformation.

Gotham's summer heat was pressing on Bruce's chest, creeping in under the cowl and making his neck sweaty, but Bruce had been through way, way worse, and his city's gritty, dirty embrace just felt more real with the accompanying heat.

Robin's hair was slightly damp with sweat, even, and his breathing was slightly heavier than usual. That didn't stop him from swinging between the rooftops at every chance he got.

Bruce felt right, secure, when he heard Damian's little happy noise over the comms as he grappled over to the next building in front of them, hitting the ground running. He shot out his own grapple to follow his excited son, glancing down in the alleys on autopilot.

They were Batman and Robin, after all. Couldn't just go around happily jumping over rooftops. For now, it was just to let Damian get his feet back under himself.

"Slow down, Robin, you're out of practice," he warned, but Damian just skipped further on, setting free a sharp, happy laugh as he did a flip in the air before landing on the next rooftop.

inally, Batman just resigned himself to not being able to stop a Robin from flying, and glanced at one of the rooftops to the left of them. The flicker of a cape suggested one of their own, and when he switched the lenses to zoom, he saw a swoosh of eggplant-colored fabric.

"Spoiler," Batman hailed, and Stephanie turned around, shooting her grapple out to land on the rooftop Damian was currently on. Bruce judged the distance between the ledge he was standing on and the rooftop in front of him. Finally, the Batman leaped, the cape spanning out to let him glide that extra, essential half-a-foot.

There was a little exclamation point appearing at the corner of his vision, with Alfred adding details in his ear: museum robbery going down tonight, a precious magical book. Great. More magic. Batman leaped to the next building without any assistance, getting back on his feet just in time to tune in to Robin and Spoiler's current conversation.

"-feel to have your slightly longer legs back?" she asked as she nudged Robin's shoulder with an elbow, probably grinning underneath the mask covering her mouth.

"How's it feel to have a smaller chest than an eleven-year-old boy?" Damian tossed back, and she gasped and actually shoved him this time, full body push that made him sway a little but not much more.

"Spoiler, Robin," Batman growled, making them turn to him but simultaneously try to kick or hurt each other. "Take the docks tonight. There's a shipment of guns coming in to the Falcone family. Stop the trade-off and ping BG about it. If you can't concentrate or work together, I'll take one of you with me to the museum."

Damian frowned, but scuffed his foot a little petulantly against the rooftop.

"It's fine," he said finally, and Stephanie crossed her arms over her chest.

"Al, shoot us all the information you've got on it, and we'll take care of it," she said into her comm.

"Of course, Miss," came Alfred's crisp voice. "And do please refrain from getting shot at. This is the third Spoiler-suit in the past two months. I should expect so from Master Bruce, but I held you in higher esteem."

"Just because you said that, I'm gonna get my ass shot! Why'd you have to jinx me?" Stephanie complained as her comm. unit chirped. She picked up her handheld, and nodded at it. "Alright, brat, let's go, follow me."

"I know which way the docks are," Damian shot back, immediately shooting out his grapple before Stephanie could even pull hers out of her belt.

"Hey, shithead, get back here!" she shouted after him, shooting out after him to another vantage point. She was definitely putting too much strain on her shoulder with that technique. He'd have to have her do some exercises before tomorrow night.

Batman stood still for a moment, listening as Damian called Stephanie something rude and taunted her that he was faster. Barbara's voice crackled in his ear about a robbery in Old Gotham and how she'd just had to convince Harley Quinn that no, she wasn't interested, thank you very much, please get in the batmobile so she could get back to Arkham safely.

If that didn't mean everything was back to normal, he didn't know what did.

Of course, one entirely new thing in his life, was Clark Kent and his need to snuggle. Honestly, Bruce hadn't known it was that serious. He was made aware, however, when he was woken up after having only been asleep for a few hours. Silently, Bruce groaned into the covers, and he heard Clark's little huff of amusement as the covers were lifted.

"Cold," Bruce grumbled.

"Sorry. Let me fix that for you," Clark's fond voice said, and suddenly instead of cold, there was nothing but heat as the reporter slid into bed with him.

"What are you even doing here?"

"I missed you," came Clark's hushed admittance, and Bruce cracked one eye open to look at the overgrown puppy in his bed.

Clark's blue eyes were practically shining with their Kryptonian glow, despite the dark room. His hair was a little mussed, and on his lips was a sweet, gorgeous smile that made Bruce's fingertips ache to trace it. Practically the epitome of perfection.

"At five am?" Bruce questioned, resisting the need to slide closer, until he remembered he didn't have to restrain himself. Immediately, he shifted closer, despite being annoyed about being woken up.

"I rise with the sun, y'know?" Clark smirked.

"Hrm. Shut up if you're gonna stay," he grumbled, pushing Clark on his back and tugging his arm over his head. The Man of Steel laughed, letting his partner manhandle him into a comfortable position.

"Was planning on it. At least for a while. Gotta fly back for work," he agreed silently.

"Mm. Maybe don't," Bruce mumbled as he buried his face in the join between Clark's shoulder and neck. *God*, but Clark was warm, like someone who'd been lying out in the sun for a few hours, that same warmth emanating from him. Mixed with the warmth from the covers, and Clark's arm curling around his shoulders, Bruce's sleepy brain was very happy with all sorts of contact.

"Oh, I'll remember that next time you complain about me never being at my job," Clark chuckled, gently tugging until Bruce was half-way on top of him, a cold hand shoved underneath Clark's torso for warmth.

"I own your job. I'll get you promoted so you don't have to go."

"Getting promoted for sleeping with the boss? 'Cause that's gonna go over well," Clark grinned, his fingers stroking their way up Bruce's arm to curl around the nape of his neck.

Bruce made a distant, sleepy humming sound, before falling fast asleep again. Clark buried his nose in his hair, smelling the harsher soap he kept down in the batcave, and blood. Bruce had always been like that. He smelled like leather and sweat and steel, but mostly the irony-tang of blood.

That had somewhat gone away during his two weeks off with the kids. Clark hadn't really been thinking about it at the time, more concerned with not sniffing his best friend like some sort of creep, but now it was back. Carefully, Clark pried the hand tucked underneath his ribcage out, and pressed it to his cheek. Yeah. There it was.

It was sort of comforting, though. He'd tuned in to Bruce a few times during the night, just because he was antsy; it was Bruce's first night out in a while, and while he had a lot of faith in his partner, he was also... A worrier, his mother would say. Something she'd definitely instilled in him. He'd heard nothing but his slow, steady heartbeat, and him occasionally berating Damian or Stephanie for reckless things, but other than that, his bat was back, and obviously happy with it. Clark was happy too.

In the comfort of the darkness, he pressed a kiss to those strong knuckles, adjusted his neck so it wouldn't be creaky the next day, and went back to sleep with Bruce's even breathing against his neck.

When Bruce woke up at around noon, Clark was gone, but there was a note on the nightstand about how Lois had found a lead and needed him to transport her to Malibu for the day. When he trudged down the stairs, Alfred forced him to eat something out on the patio, a lovely pesto and quinoa mix or something. It was green and tasted like basil anyway, and didn't make Bruce feel uncomfortably full. Alfred knew him too well.

He checked up on Cassandra, and helped her upstairs to sit outside on the grass in the sun, armed with a few batarangs just in case, before he went to find Damian. They were his only kids left in the house now, and it didn't so much feel empty as it... No, no, it did feel empty. Emptier, at the very least.

Damian was sitting in one of the sitting rooms, furthest away from the rest of the most frequented rooms. The furtniture was covered by sheets here to preserve them, only removed when Bruce held galas, which wasn't all that often anymore. He used his kids as an excuse whenever the press asked. Mostly he didn't like people snooping around in his house.

His youngest was curled up in front of the cold fireplace, drawing with his earbuds in and his blue hood up. Damian's huge, black dog was curled up on the floor next to him, lying on his side like he'd just been scratched on the belly. The moment Bruce entered the room, the boy looked up and nodded a greeting, before returning to his drawing. Bruce tucked his bathrobe tighter around himself, shoved his hands into the pockets, and turned to look out the window.

"Any plans today? Now that you're back to being mobile," he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Not unless we have a mission," Damian shrugged, looking up at him. "Do we?"

"No, no," Bruce reassured. Damian looked slightly disappointed, but nodded and turned back to his drawing. He stood in silence for a while, contemplating. The current Robin kept drawing, ignoring his father's presence.

"If you want to call Colin or Maya over, that would be okay," Bruce finally hedged, not looking back this time.

"Is the alien coming over too?" Damian tossed back, his tone a little sharp. Not the angry way he always tended to sound, but another sort of tone, like he didn't want Clark here at all. Bruce sighed, and rubbed the back of his neck. This night had been great, he'd slept more peacefully than he usually would with a romantic partner. He'd just have to trust Dick, that Damian would come around eventually.

"No. He's working. Like most responsible adults do," Bruce sighed tiredly, squinting out at the slightly cloudy sky through the window. "If you're not in the mood for outside company, how about you set your drawing up out in the garden? It's a nice day."

Damian's head turned to look at him quickly. Bruce met his gaze, knowing Damian appreciated not being treated like a child all the time.

"I don't think so," he said, frowning.

"No? It's just me and Cassandra out there. I know she'd like you there," he coaxed. Damian's frown didn't waver, and Bruce internally sighed. No, he didn't think so. Glancing over at Titus, however, gave him an idea.

He waited until Damian looked back down at his paper, before carefully treading closer. When he was right next to Damian, he sank down on his haunches.

"How about you, Titus?" Bruce asked, letting a small smile slip free as he rubbed the big dog's belly. "Can I convince you to get some sun? Wanna go outside?"

At outside, Titus' ears perked, and he made a whuffling sound, before scrambling to right himself. His tail was wagging happily as Bruce rose again, scratching behind his ears as a reward for being such a good, clever dog.

"That's the spirit. We'll be outside if you change your mind," Bruce assured, and felt Damian's green-blue eyes on them as they exited the room. Titus trotted along with him down the hall, stopping to glance back at the door once or twice, fully convinced his little master would join them. "Give him a bit, Titus. C'mon, I'll let you run free out on the yard."

Bruce set Titus free the moment they walked out the veranda doors, and immediately, he ran out over the big field, barking happily. Cassandra laughed at him, ripping little pieces of grass out of the lawn. That was fine by him. Titus took a lap around the yard as Bruce sat down on one of the intricately carved, white iron chairs. He picked the Gotham Gazette up, and waited.

It didn't take too long before Damian showed up, maybe twenty minutes. By then, Titus had gotten some of his energy out, and had trotted over to Cassandra to play and lick her in the face.

Finally, a barefoot Damian came strolling out onto the patio, sinking down in one of the other chairs, and slapping his notebook down on the table. Bruce didn't say anything, just kept reading the paper, and waited. Enjoyed his son's company, enjoyed a sunny day, enjoyed hearing Cassandra laugh as she tossed a baseball for Titus with her considerable strength.

"Were you ever artistic, father?" Damian snarked after they'd sat there for a few moments in silence, but the look in his eyes told Bruce that he was actually interested, looking for common ground. Bruce was so

goddamn happy Dick Grayson existed and had worked some of his magic on his little eleven-year-old. He was also pleased Damian being a vulnerable child and expressing it hadn't swept all of their progress away.

"Not really. Your mother taught me to dance, if that counts," Bruce smiled to himself, thinking back. Talia was a demanding dance partner, and wouldn't let him lead until he earned it.

"Possibly. Grandfather spoke of ballet as something that could be used as something akin to a fighting-style," Damian frowned in concentration. "Cassandra does that sometimes, I believe."

"Partly yes. Ballet specifically is very useful when you have stronger legs than arms, which women usually do," Bruce agreed when Titus trotted up to him and dropped a slobbery baseball in his lap, his tail wagging happily and with his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"-TT- Silly dog," Damian scoffed, and *there* was a sound Bruce hadn't heard in a while. Oh, he'd sort of missed Damian's little snorts and tsks. "Here. I'll play fetch with you."

The boy grabbed the ball, walking over to the edge of the patio and looking composed. However, when he leaned back a little to get the ball to go further, his eyes glittered, and he tossed the ball a good ways out. Bruce covered his smile with the newspaper, but kept it just low enough that he'd be able to see how far the ball went.

"Nice throw," he said approvingly as Titus zoomed after the ball, and got a fierce smirk back.

"Of course, father. Anything else would have been unacceptable," Damian announced a little haughtily, before nearly getting tackled to the ground by his huge, overexcited dog. Bruce hid his chuckle behind the newspaper this time around too.

Chapter End Notes

> Gah, I'm sorry, this is still not the end! The talk got a bit longer than I anticipated, and I still have three things total I need to fit in here, so expect at least one more chapter, possibly two!
> Also sorry about the slightly late update, had a huge test today and couldn't stay up writing that night because I needed sleep. Now I also need sleep.

Hope you're still enjoying yourself though! Thank you so much for your wonderful support!! <3<3<3

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Clark landed in the cave, it was empty. That was weird. Not even Cassandra was in the medbay, and in shock, he widened the limits for his hearing just enough to hear Alfred puttering around in the kitchen, probably preparing dinner. He searched the rest of the manor, and heard the purring of Alfred the cat up in Damian's room, the ticking of the clock in Bruce's study, the buzzing of a phone underneath Tim's bed.

But no bats.

He floated upstairs, glancing out the window in Bruce's study just in time to see a small ball whizzing by outside. Clark moved to look out, and saw nothing there. Huh. Maybe they'd gone out into the city or something? No, he'd been invited for dinner in Bruce's usual brusque way, they should still be here. At least Cassandra should still be here, she definitely wasn't doing great still, would need to rest.

He went down to the kitchen to greet Alfred, but stopped in the dining room, and by the open veranda doors. He could hear Cassandra's sweet giggle, and he looked outside to see her sitting on the edge of the patio in a hoodie and shorts, leaning against a chair. On the lawn in front of her, a few yards out, Bruce was tossing a ball to Damian, who had a baseball bat, and excellent hand-eye coordination.

There was the crack of a baseball hitting aluminum, and the ball flew off into the distance. Immediately Titus went off to fetch it.

"Angle it a little more," Bruce said, not a suggestion but a guideline, entirely in teaching-Batman mode, and Damian grimaced.

"It's a foolish game with no point," the boy pointed out, doing some practice-swings in the air in front of him. There was something pained in the set of Bruce's shoulders when he heard that, and a little sigh escaped him. No doubt sadness that Damian, who was just a kid, couldn't find the fun in doing something a little pointless just because it was fun.

"See it as a training exercise," Bruce replied without hesitancy, as Titus bounded back to him with the ball. "Try to hit the trees over there."

"Which one?"

"The one farthest to the left." Damian rolled his eyes, but put his bat up again, practically perfect form, loose and ready. Clark heard the door open behind him to his right, and turned his head to see Alfred appearing.

"Hi Alfred," Clark said, smiling at the old man. Alfred offered a twitch of a lip in return, which was essentially the same thing. "How's dinner coming along?"

"Fine, thank you, Master Clark. It will be ready soon," he agreed, and Clark nodded, looking back out at Damian and Bruce not so much arguing as debating about whether baseball really could be considered a sport, what with how little actual sporting happened.

"How long have they been out there?" he questioned.

"All day, Sir," Alfred said, sounding mildly shocked, which in and of itself spoke volumes for what they usually did on a weekend. "I believe it has to do with Master Bruce not having been caught up on a case yet, although patrol went well last night."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "That'll definitely do it. All day?"

"Lunch was eaten outside, with Miss Cassandra retreating inside only once to take a short nap. Other than that, they've spent the day exclusively outside," Alfred relayed, and Clark gaped a little incredulously.

"Huh," he said thoughtfully. "Who's joining us for dinner?"

"Master Richard should be arriving soon, however that will be it for guests. Master Timothy and Miss Stephanie will be joining us for patrol, and a midnight snack, but I believe the young master is eating dinner with his Titans, and Miss Stephanie with Miss Barbara and the Birds of Prey."

"Ah," Clark said, glancing out at the others again. "What's for dinner?"

"A lovely quinoa sallad with chicken and pesto," Alfred announced. "I'm sure you will enjoy it, Master Clark."

"Great," he agreed, glancing back at the others just as Cassandra turned her head to look at them. Alfred disappeared back into the kitchen as he smiled at her and took a step out on the patio.

"Hi Clark," she said, and Bruce's head turned, a smile on his face that could light up the world better than the sun, it was so beautiful. Clark was flying over before he'd even consciously realized it, landing about a foot away from Bruce and nearly kissing that smile off his face, just to see if he could taste the sunshine in it, when he saw Damian twirl his baseball bat again, fast enough to break bone.

Instead of sweeping Bruce into his arms and kissing him, he clenched his hands a little nervously.

"Hi," he said, and Bruce blinked at him, mirth in his eyes.

"Hi Clark," Bruce said, his voice entirely deadpan but the twinkle in his eyes and the slight creases around them indicated just how amused he was by Clark freezing. "How was work?"

"Fine. Lois is ready to physically fight Perry to get her story published, so that's... something, for sure," he stated a little incredulously. Titus ran up to Bruce, handing him the slobbery ball and immediately going for Clark, barking happily and licking his hand. "Hi Titus. Having fun, huh, boy?"

"Yeah, we've been outside today," Bruce said slowly, like the concept was a little foreign to him. "Lane could take him. She's strong-willed. She'll get her way, if it's a good article."

"I've read it. It's good. Crazy good, even. Last I saw her, she was pushing to make it into a series," Clark said, wiggling his eyebrows as he petted Titus' head gently.

"I'd make a gesture of some sort to get her published, but she probably doesn't need my help, does she?" Bruce asked, sounding pretty amused. Clark shook his head.

"I think she's good, actually. She'd probably just be mad."

"Fair enough," Bruce agreed, turning to Damian and brushing his shoulder against Clark's as he did so. "Ready?"

Damian took the appropriate stance, and waited. Bruce tossed him the ball, and he swung the bat in a swooping arch, hitting the ball with a satisfying crack. Titus leaped away from Clark and after the ball,

which had flown almost halfway to the trees that dotted the edge of the property.

"Nice hit! That'd be at least a triple," Clark exclaimed, shading his eyes from the sunlight on reflex as he followed the arch of the ball in the air.

"He's getting much better," Bruce agreed. "The first few tries, he could barely hit a single. Goes to show how good practice is for you."

"*Father*," Damian said in shock, like he couldn't believe Bruce was divulging weaknesses to someone outside the family.

"What?" Bruce tossed back, a pointed look on his face, and Damian frowned like he honestly had no idea what was going on in his father's head anymore.

"Oh my *god*, have you been outside all day? You madmen! Bruce, your skin can't take this much exposure to sunlight, you'll explode!" Dick exclaimed from the patio, hands on his cheeks in mock-horror and thankfully interrupting them. Bruce narrowed his eyes at him over Clark's shoulder.

"Grayson," Damian greeted, pushing the baseball cap on his head up and out of his eyes. "I bet I can hit this pesky ball further than you, and best you in this poor excuse for a sport."

"Baseball's never been my thing. I bet Clark played, though, didn't you, country boy?" Dick asked pointedly as he went over to where Cassandra was sitting, and sat down in front of her, letting her curl a hand into his hair. Clark scratched the back of his neck a little sheepishly.

"A while," he admitted as Titus bounded back with the ball, giving it to Bruce, who smiled and scratched behind Titus' ears.

"All through middle-school," he supplied, and Damian narrowed his eyes, first at his father, and then his older brother.

"Yeah, but I was never really good at it. If it weren't for my superstrength, you'd beat me without a doubt, Damian," Clark smiled.

"It's not all about brute force," Damian scoffed, tossing the bat up on his shoulder a little cockily. It wasn't wood, but aluminium. A softball bat then, too big for t-ball. Damian would probably have thrown a fit if it was a t-ball bat. "Just because father has more strength doesn't

mean I can't hit it further than him."

"Now, *that*, I'd love to see," Clark grinned. Bruce scoffed, and Damian's frown grew into a cheeky smirk.

"What's the matter, father? Can't take a challenge?" he asked, all sharp, abrasive edges, and Clark liked this Damian a lot too. So much like Bruce, so much like Dick, so much like... Damian, simply.

"Hmmm," Bruce grunted, and crossed his arms over his chest. "It wouldn't be fair. I've been tossing it to you, you tossing it to me wouldn't generate the same circumstances, speaking from a physics perspective."

"I could pitch for both of you. Then it's all equal and you can't claim anyone's cheating," Clark pointed out, and Bruce furrowed his eyebrows at him, a look on his face like '*why are you enabling him*'. Clark grinned back, and took the ball out of Bruce's hand. "C'mon. Scared you can't hit it out of the park?"

"More worried your throw isn't going to be optimal," Bruce shot back, narrowing his eyes at Clark. There was now less than a foot of space between them, and Clark was too busy getting lost in the incredible blue of Bruce's eyes to see Damian roll his eyes at them.

"Yeah? I'll have you know I'm very good at pitching."

"Is that so, Kansas?"

"Yeah. I'll bet you can't hit what I throw at you."

"You'd be setting yourself up for failure," Bruce taunted, and Clark shook his head.

"No, really, Bruce. I don't think you can do it," he said patiently. This time, when Bruce looked him over, he didn't narrow his eyes. He just hummed.

"I can."

"Just kiss already!" Dick called over, and Cassandra used her hand in his hair to pull his head back in warning, but while Clark blushed a little and stuttered, Bruce just rolled his eyes.

"Dinner is ready, if the masters and the miss would take their seats," Alfred said as he poked his head out through the veranda doors.

"Ah, saved by the bell, father. I will take you up on your challenge next time," Damian said haughtily, his nose in the air as he dropped the bat on the lawn, and stomped off towards the house with Titus hot on his heels. When Cassandra reached a hand out, he reluctantly helped her to her feet with the help of Dick, and lead her into the dining room. Bruce was just about to follow them, when Clark stopped him.

"Hey, wait," he said, glancing at the open doors suspiciously. Bruce raised an eyebrow at him.

"What, Clark?" Bruce asked, a little grouchily. He wanted to eat and gear up for patrol as soon as possible, get out on the streets. Clark glanced at the doors again, but decided it was worth whatever threat he saw in white, flowy curtains and intricate glass doors, when he tugged on Bruce's hand and pulled him in closer.

"Hi," Clark breathed, cupping Bruce's face with one hand to bring him in even closer. Bruce went willingly, pressing his lips to Clark's sweetly in a delayed greeting. Clark's other arm wrapped around Bruce's waist, but it was Bruce himself who pulled them closer together, hip against hip, stomach to stomach. Bruce's tongue swiped behind Clark's teeth before retreating back into his mouth, with Clark's chasing after. They realigned, and pressed together again, this time warmer, a little more heatedly.

"Hi," Bruce rumbled when they finally parted with a wet noise. Clark really didn't mean to be this clingy, really, he didn't, but Bruce was finally, *finally* his, and he had to touch his fill to make up for the past, oh, six years. "Damian really makes you that nervous?"

"No," Clark said defensively, and Bruce chuckled, a hand caressing his shoulder and brushing his fingertips against the skin exposed over his mustard-yellow collar. "I just, y'know, don't want to..."

"Anger him?" Bruce suggested. At Clark's sad-puppy look, Bruce sighed. "Look, sooner or later, he's going to have to accept this. Or at least get along well enough with you that he's... Going along with it. If you want to ease him into it, fine, but that's bound to make him even angrier. He doesn't like it when you treat him like the child he is."

"He's a tricky one, your kid, you know that?" Clark exhaled. Bruce eyed Clark skeptically.

"If you think it's too much..." Bruce began, but the reporter swiftly stopped that train of thought by dropping a quick kiss on his lips.

"No, that's not what I was going for. I'm not leaving you, Bruce," Clark said a little incredulously. At his lover's slightly insecure look, Clark squeezed his arm a little gently. "I'm serious. I'm in this for the long haul, B."

"You say that now," he said slowly as he slipped away, but Clark caught his hand, squeezing his fingers as well.

"Yeah. And I'll keep saying it," he assured. Bruce still had that slightly insecure look on his face, but Clark didn't let that stop him. "C'mon, let's go, before they think we're up to something."

"Up to what?" Bruce asked casually, but simultaneously grabbed a good handful of Clark's ass and gave it a loving squeeze. Clark yelped, holding a warning finger up at a now silently smirking bat.

"Oh, you are going to regret that," Clark huffed in mock-annoyance as they strolled over towards the patio, Bruce muffling his chuckle behind his hand.

Dinner was, as expected, delicious, and Clark paid his respects to the chef, who took the compliment graciously, telling Bruce right out that he could learn from Master Clark's excellent manners. To which Bruce retorted that he had been raised by his butler, and that his lack of manners fell on Alfred.

At that, the butler gave him a verbal lash, leaving Dick nearly falling out of his chair with laughter, and even Damian grinning.

When Clark had offered to go on patrol with them later, Dick had winced, Cassandra had raised an eyebrow at him, and Bruce had ranted for a solid four minutes about how no metas were allowed to patrol in his goddamn city, no matter how much Clark had been helping out lately.

Alfred offered him a bed in the manor for the night since he wouldn't be going out, which Dick snorted out loud at, and Cassandra smirked at. Clark did have some work to catch up on, and if he stayed over, he wouldn't have to sleep alone tonight either. It was Sunday tomorrow, after all, and he'd probably be able to stay in bed longer, if only Bruce was there with him.

Whilst the majority of the others moved down to the cave to prepare for this evening's patrol, Clark watched the evening news and read a

book. He would go down there, but seeing Bruce half-into his suit would just do things to Clark he couldn't control, and Bruce's *kids* would be there. Bad combination as a whole.

Later, he managed to mess up by opening the Wayne-Manor doors for Stephanie when she rang the doorbell, unthinkingly, and was reprimanded by her for being an idiot who obviously didn't care about secret identities, and by Alfred for opening the door when that was his job, and not Clark's.

After that, he got shooed up to one of the sitting rooms upstairs, one nearby the study instead, where he couldn't do any harm, supposedly. There was no tv in there, and Clark felt his mind drifting as he read the newspaper, until he was just thinking.

There was something bothering him about this whole new situation.

He missed being able to pick up Damian like he was a little sack of potatoes. While he knew Damian, aged eleven, would hate him for that, Clark couldn't help it. He felt like he'd lost a valuable bond with Bruce's youngest now that he was back to being grown, and he missed it with a surprising ferocity.

This Damian didn't like him all that much. However, the fact that he'd liked him at one point was enough for Clark to want to... mend bridges, probably. The reporter was unsure what it classified as, magic tended to muddle the waters like that. He wanted to talk to Damian without being sneered at, but he was pretty sure that was a right reserved to Dick Grayson, and Clark was not Dick.

But Bruce had pointed out that Damian loved that sketchbook he'd gotten him from Nepal. They could connect, if only Damian would give it a chance. If Clark had to initiate, so be it. He would definitely do that. It was for the best of his and Bruce's relationship, and for his and Damian's. They'd have to at least attempt to get along if he was ever going to maintain a relationship with Bruce.

The rest of the batkids, he was on pretty good terms with, but Damian had always been a little too much like Bruce; wearing a crazy amount of mental armor under the Robin one, and very unfriendly to whoever tried to approach him.

Clark blinked his eyes back into focus, and sharpened his hearing. There was the sound of feet padding down the hallway. Small feet. Immediately he was up and out of his chair, peeking out of the doorway. There he was, indeed, wearing a hoodie and earbuds. Clark

waved to get his attention, and Damian scowled, pulling his one earbud out.

"What?" he demanded.

"Damian, can I talk to you for a second?" Clark asked politely, and the boy gave him a suspicious look. Clark held his hands up with a disarming smile.

"I have to suit up for patrol," Damian said slowly.

"Promise it'll just take a minute."

"Fine. What do you want, *Kent*," he demanded, and Clark nodded to the plush armchair in front of his own. Damian looked even more suspicious, but took a seat, leaning back in it like it was a throne and not a very old and very soft armchair.

"Look," Clark said patiently, maintaining eye contact with Damian as he spoke. He saw so much of Bruce in the young boy when he had that calculating look. He decided to start with reasons Damian might not want to talk to him at all. "I get that you felt embarrassed about what happened in the cave yesterday, and that you don't really want to talk about it, but you don't have to be embarrassed or anything."

Damian was silent for a while, watching him, and then he pulled his other earbud out, tapping his fingers against the armrests a little restlessly, before clenching his hands.

"It was *childish*." The boy said the word 'childish' like one might talk about the plague, disgusted and repulsed.

"It was *sweet*. We bonded when you were a toddler, and I find that a little reassuring. At least I now know some version of you doesn't despise me," Clark smiled, keeping his tone light.

"I don't... Not..." Damian stuttered a little, and then crossed his arms over his chest, like he was insecure. That made Clark's heart flutter a little. Everything wasn't lost. Without anyone else around, just the two of them, he could get Damian to admit he didn't hate him. Wow. However, the fact that it took that to get him to show any semblance of any positive emotion, suggested Bruce wasn't the only person Talia had screwed up.

"I just wanted you to know that I like hugs," Clark explained patiently. Damian raised an eyebrow at him like he was a weird alien. "And that

I get if you're too big and bad to hug me now, but I'd still be open to it. I know you don't get a lot of hugs from your family. It doesn't make you weak to ask. In fact, it shows strength, to show that you dare to step out of your shell sometimes."

Damian's eyes were a little wide, but he hadn't up and left yet. Clark had his hopes.

"What's your point?" Damian asked softly, the majority of his abrasiveness tucked away for the moment. Clark cherished that show of trust.

"I'm here, if you need me. For a hug, or for drawing, or for school work, or anything at all. Okay?" Clark said, watching this process in Damian's green eyes. And then they darkened.

"You're just doing this to get in my father's pants. Well, you've already been there. No need to keep up the charade," Damian said, a little nastily, and Clark scoffed a little sadly.

"Why can't you believe I genuinely care about you?"

"Because you're not family. You're just a stranger."

"I'm not even a family friend?" Clark asked, a little dejectedly. Damian watched him again.

"You're just another of father's conquests. He'll move on soon enough."

"And what if he doesn't?" Clark asked gently. "What if we end up staying together? What then? Are you going to try and kill me just because I'm not who you want me to be?" At that, Damian flinched a little, and Clark knew he'd hit a nerve. "I'm so sorry, Damian, but I think you're sort of stuck with me."

"And you with me," Damian pointed out acidly. Clark smiled.

"Well, see, I actually enjoy your company. So I'm not stuck in the least," he said confidently. Damian's eyebrows raised skeptically.

"Really?"

"What is it with you Waynes and not being able to understand that you're not insufferable every single second of every day? Your dad says the same things, essentially," Clark said, a little exasperated. "I just wanted you to know, I'm here for you. Okay?"

Damian was silent for a surprising amount of time, but he wasn't looking away or getting up to leave. He was just thinking. Clark held onto that.

"Are you my step-father now?" he finally asked. It was a surprising show of his age, but Clark was still unprepared, and he flushed.

"Oh, gosh, I- no. No, I'm not your stepfather. You are never ever required to think of me as that. I'm just Clark. Or Kal, if you prefer that."

"But you're still going to date father."

"That's the general idea, yeah," Clark grinned, feeling a little lightheaded just thinking about it. Him and Bruce. *Dating*.

"Fine... Kal," Damian said slowly, and got up, looking at him suspiciously again. "Just know I know the code for the vault with the green-K, and have an excellent track record with hiding bodies."

"Duly noted," Clark chuckled, and stood up as well. He was surprised to find Damian burying his face the reporter's stomach, but quickly embraced the small child. Because he was still a child, the youngest of all of them, forced into the fight too early and not pulled out until he came bloody and screaming. Clark was prepared to give Damian all the love his parents had trouble giving out.

He stroked Damian's hair gently, feeling a bit of moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes, which was ridiculous. It wasn't like he'd been wanting this to happen since he'd met Damian in the first place, saw that sneer that was so much like Bruce's. No. Not at all.

"Alright, hurry off to patrol," Clark said finally, his voice a little rough as he pulled back and ruffled Damian's hair gently. Damian nodded, not meeting his eyes as he hurried out of the room. "Be careful!" Clark called after him, and didn't hear anything back. He laughed a little to himself, feeling lightheaded as he sat back down.

Yeah. This could be great.

Bruce was sat by the batcomputer, checking the list of wanteds and chatting with Babs about Stephanie's grapple technique. She agreed that she was putting too much strain on her shoulder, and that she would talk to her about it, because whenever Bruce tried to bug her

about it, she waved him off. Annoying how easily his ex-Robins did that nowadays.

Tim had been dropped off by Kon a little while ago, giving each other a sweet kiss before the super disappeared again. Dick teased him relentlessly for it, and sang "Sweet Love" at the top of his lungs, until Tim put him in a chokehold. Now, however, Stephanie and Dick were suiting up, and Tim was already straddling a bike and checking his grapple, seeing as he'd come home suited. Bruce saw as Damian strolled down the stairs out of the corner of his eye, rubbing distractedly at one eye and looking a little pensive.

"Are you alright, Damian? If you're tired, you don't have to go out," Bruce offered as he turned the chair around to face him. Damian stopped in his tracks, his hand pulling away from his eyes immediately. Bruce felt a dull stab of pain under his ribs at the thought of Damian not feeling safe enough to be vulnerable right now.

"I'm fine, father."

"Know your limits," Bruce pressed, and Damian rolled his eyes at him, like he was being annoying for insisting his child didn't overexert themselves. He'd keep track of him during the night, send him home without any argument if he began to look too tired.

"If you're tired, father, I'm sure I could manage fine on my own."

"We've had this discussion many times Damian, you're not going out on your own, especially not with Ivy out and on the loose," Bruce said, exasperated. The boy pouted a little, but moved past him towards his uniform. "I mean it, Damian!" he called after him.

"Yeah yeah," Damian grouched as he hopped down the stairs. "Coming or not, father?"

Bruce would've stood up in that moment and followed his impatient son, if he hadn't felt a presence slowly slip up behind him. Hmmm. *That* was interesting. He wondered when he'd managed to slip in. He did have his own access codes, with certain limitations, what with him barely wanting anything to do with them.

"I'll be there in a minute," Bruce said calmly, spinning around in his chair to face the shadows next to the monitors. He stared in silence, waiting, until he could see the outline of the Red Hood helmet in the darkness. "Did you forget something, Jason?"

"Forgot? No. More like remembered," Jason said darkly, stepping out from the darkness. He was in full Red Hood gear, minus the guns in their holsters. Probably Dick's doing, always ready to diffuse a situation before it escalates. Would also explain how he got this far into the cave.

When Bruce didn't say anything or stand up, Jason slammed his helmet down on the computerpanel, to be able to swing his fists freely, probably. Considering the fact that that thing was rigged to blow on command, Bruce considered diving for cover underneath the panel, but since nothing happened, he instead stayed put, and met Jason's eyes through the clear lenses on his domino. Bruce wondered if he would still see the freckles if he got close enough.

"The night we were turned into children, before it actually happened. The moment I showed up, you began yelling at me," he said slowly. "Literally, the minute I put my foot on a rooftop in your vicinity, you barked 'Red Hood' like I was supposed to come sit in front of you like an obedient puppy and get yelled at."

"I yelled because three days before that, you killed a man in front of me and ran off, so yes, that was called for, Jason," Bruce interrupted, and Jason held up a finger at him.

"Shut up, I wasn't finished. When I was being a kid, a normal kid, you yelled at me for being upset. Now, I obviously can't do anything right by your standards, that's something we've already established, so what I can't actually get, what's been bugging me, is the fact that-" He cut himself off, clenching his hands into fists.

"Is what, Jason?" Bruce asked, turning away from him and clicking up a file on the computer just so they didn't look each other in the eye, because Bruce would stand up in anger, and Jason would set that damn helmet off.

"You should have just let me go," Jason said sharply, already picking a fight, already back to being hurt and angry again.

"In Gotham? In the middle of the night? You were ten years old," Bruce reminded him without looking up.

"So?"

"You might hate me and think I betrayed you," he replied evenly, "but I don't leave orphaned ten-year-olds out in Gotham if I can prevent it. Especially not one of my sons."

"I'm not your son," Jason spat at him, and Bruce reminded himself that Jason liked Jane Austen's books, that he thought socks with rockets on them were cool. He was still his Jason, not just the cold, angry young man in front of him right now. The blaze in his eyes was as much a barbed wire warning him away, as it was an outstretched hand, begging to be pulled up from the edge. It was always like that with Jason. A scream of betrayal and 'help me' at the same time.

"That's simply not true," Bruce said patiently, and he saw Jason gearing up to argue, to get an excuse to fight him. He interrupted him before he could. "I have it on good authority you don't like our current relationship. Neither do I, really. We need middle ground if we are ever going to have a civil conversation about anything. But for that to happen, we need to cooperate."

Jason gaped at him for a moment, and Bruce felt his stomach twist. Did they really act badly enough that Bruce offering middle-ground shocked Jason into silence?

"Whose authority?" the young man asked finally.

"Yours."

Jason gaped.

"I was ten fucking years old, you can't- you can't hold that against me," he said, aghast as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Against you?" Bruce repeated, incredulous. "I'm not holding it against you. I'm using it as ground to stand on."

"Yeah no, it's being used against me."

"Jason-" Bruce sighed.

"I was ten, I was begging for your attention like a greedy little-"

"-Child? Yes, children generally need more attention than young adults do. You're no exception," Bruce interrupted. "I wouldn't just leave you on the street because you've been acting up-"

"-Acting up? Oh, *fuck off*, old man," Jason snarled. "You just want me to fit your nice little Robin-mold, turn me back into one of your precious lapdogs, like the golden boy and Timbo. Guess what? No matter how much you want us to look and act and speak alike, we're not the same! I don't buy into your bullshit and just go along with it

like Dick would do."

"I think you forget certain key-points in mine and Dick's relationship. He barely talked to me right in the beginning, when I'd taken you in. We argue a lot, whether it's about Damian's education, or what he calls my 'obsessiveness', or what he thinks of Talia, or my sleeping habits, or what I think of his dining habits, or about a case where we're both involved. We argue just as much as you and I do, except it doesn't blow up in our faces like the fights you and I have."

"Yeah, right," Jason scoffed derisively.

"You don't think Dick and I fight?" Bruce asked incredulously. "We had a fight just yesterday about him meddling in my life."

"Who are you to give him a lecture about that anyway?"

"Contrary to common belief, it's usually entirely uninteresting to me who you're all dating, unless it's someone I don't find suitable." Jason blinked in sudden surprise, and then he pressed his one fist against his mouth for a moment, the slight wrinkle in the domino suggesting he was furrowing his eyebrows in concentration.

"Holy fuck, I called you a fag. *Oh my god*, I asked *you* if I was *bisexual*!" he exclaimed in shock, out of the blue. Bruce blinked back at him.

"You did," he replied evenly, as Jason groaned in mortification and covered his face with his hands. "It was... Sweet."

"Do not!" Jason nearly shouted, pointing a finger at him warningly. Had this been a little over two weeks ago, Bruce would have been more battle-ready than this. As it was now, his face cracked into a small smile. "I'm serious!"

"It was a valid query. Kids are curious. Dick wouldn't stop talking about his alledged boyfriend." Jason rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, he never could keep his mouth shut, no matter what age, obviously."

"I know we never talked about it, but I'm..." Bruce tilted his head as his second oldest made a hand-wave to shut him up.

"Yeah, yeah, I figured, what with the being fucked by Superman thing," Jason said, shaking his head in disbelief, at himself or Bruce, the older man couldn't tell. "Kudos to the golden bird to finally

making his childhood dreams come true."

"I honestly don't understand why this has been a childhood dream of a surprising amount of people," Bruce said, a little exasperated.

"You've been wanting to get in each others pants for a billion years, B," Jason scoffed, waving him off. "It's not about childhood dreams, it's about not being simultaneously blind, deaf, and dumb."

"I never... noticed."

"Yeah, well," Jason agreed, making a vague hand-gesture like 'what can you do', "genuine emotion's not your strongest suit and never has been. I can one-up you there every time."

"I... Don't doubt that," Bruce agreed, and their eyes locked for a moment. Jason was the first to look away, if only to glance down at the others, now joining Tim on the bikes and talking, tossing insults and tactics around. Bruce looked over at the panel again, the ominous glinting of the Red Hood helmet. Finally, Jason just sighed loudly.

"How do you think that's gonna work out, even, Worlds finest? Us getting along? We literally agree on nothing, ever," he said, a little incredulous and with his hands on his hips. Bruce rolled that thought around in his head. They didn't agree on morals, yes, they both had different disciplines, but they both agreed Tchaikovsky was a mastermind, and that the Gotham Knights were superior to the Metropolis Meteors. They both wanted Gotham back up on her feet, wanted to offer the victims on the street another chance.

Same goal, different methods, but wasn't that always the case with the two of them? Another reason why they worked so great together as Batman and Robin. Nearly as coordinated as he and Dick, but Jason offered a new angle, a new perspective, wouldn't let Bruce get away with not listening to him.

"We both enjoy the Narnia-books," he offered finally, thinking back to having Jason curled up next to him on a loveseat, reading out loud together.

"What, you're expecting us to just, what, sit down and read C.S. Lewis, with me all hopped up in your lap, and suddenly get along?" Jason asked him, looking at him like he was a crazy person. He'd rather handle the confused shock than the hurt, the anger, all of it. This, this was the Jason Bruce kept forgetting existed underneath the guns and the explosives and the death-threats.

At the look on his face, Jason frowned.

"We're *not* doing that," he said firmly. Bruce exhaled through his nose.

"Rubber bullets, then."

"Rubber bullets," Jason repeated. Bruce didn't parrot it back to him, only locking their eyes without hesitation. At least one of them had to give ground for this to work, and since Bruce was in the right, it shouldn't be him. Jason pressed his lips together, shaking his head. "Rubber fucking bullets are gonna make me like you more? Un-fucking-likely."

"It gives you a seat at the metaphorical table. Gives you our network as well as your own. It might not make you like me any more, but it gives us more opportunities to interact."

"Wow. Rubber bullets is like putting a band-aid on a canon-ball-sized wound, you get that, right?" Jason snapped. Bruce considered that.

"You'd be invited to Sunday dinners. Movie nights," he offered, because he knew, more than Jason probably thought, just what it was like to miss your family. To miss that sense of belonging was an unbearable ache, and while Bruce had no doubt Jason tried to make a new family out of the Outlaws and various friends, that was different than this family.

That family hadn't taught him how to grapple, hadn't seen him off to his first day of school, hadn't celebrated his first birthday off the streets, hadn't mourned him like this one had.

"Think about it," Bruce said when it was made clear from Jason's angry stance that whatever reply he'd get now was negative and filled with expletives. No need to waste either one's time, then. Bruce stood up from his chair, pushing back his shoulders and taking a deep breath to test his limits. Automatically, Jason straightened too, his arms crossed over his chest now. He always did that, tried to look taller than him.

"The answer's no," Jason tossed out, grabbing his helmet. Bruce hummed thoughtfully.

"Think about it," he said again, moving towards the staircase. When he glanced down, the rest of his kids were fiddling with their belts or grapples, obviously eavesdropping to some extent. "Isn't it past time someone got out on patrol?" he asked, increasing the volume of his

voice, and almost immediately, Damian's bike turned on and sped out of the cave. Dick's followed, and then Tim's. Stephanie, entirely shameless, turned her head to look up at their landing and pulled her mask down a little.

"Jase, if you're staying to trash the cave for a while, keep in mind that Cass is probably gonna try to go to sleep soon, so if you could not, that would be swell! We'll just trash the Batmobile or something later!"

"Nobody is touching the Batmobile," Bruce called behind him as he disappeared into the locker rooms, catching the faint sound of Stephanie stage-whispering 'that's what he thinks'.

Chapter End Notes

Slightly angstier than I'd planned, and also waaay longer than I'd planned, but just one more chapter, and then I'm entirely done! Promise!
Also, sorry about the late update, I had three tests this week, and last night when I tried to post, I just crashed. This is extra long to make up for the little wait!
Also, also, absolutely insane that we've reached over 2000 kudos!!!! Absolutely wicked, this fanfic has been a wild ride for me, getting familiar with the characters and all that, but you guys have been really sweet and wonderfully encouraging!!!
PS. me imagining a young Clark playing baseball comes from that one comic continuity where Bruce and Clark meet as kids when Bruce's limo breaks down out in Kansas, and Clark teaches an entirely clueless Bruce how to hit a baseball. Don't know what issue that is, or of what, but I know it's a thing
PSS. see what I did there with Damian and Clark?? the "i don't... not"?? stolen entirely from the justice league movie, pls don't sue, it was just cute

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gotham felt the immediate impact of having all of its protectors back on the streets that night. GCPD could barely keep up with how many they were busting and tagging for the squad cars to pick up.

Batman had to talk to Commissioner Gordon to explain his absence, but didn't give him any details, just that they'd been held up for a while. He disappeared off the rooftop before Gordon could demand more answers, and watched from a distance as Batgirl, Spoiler, and Red Robin took down a smuggling ring. From the tilt of Red Robin's head before he went in, he probably knew they were being watched, but as long as Bruce let them interact on their own, he probably wouldn't protest the monitoring.

Tim seems to have gotten his sea legs back easily, rolling onto his feet again like he always did. Not with his usual desperation, however. A little more languid, like he knew he could take the time. Bruce appreciated that he tried to slow down a little. Tim was always going so fast, hurtling in all directions at once.

Batman was standing on that rooftop a little too long, probably, because he felt a presence come up behind him, and when he turned his head just the slightest, he picked up the flutter of a black cape. Right.

"Nice to see you still don't trust us," Red Robin said, twirling his bo-staff a little thoughtfully as he approached.

"How are you feeling?" Bruce asked as he turned to face him, instead of acknowledging that statement. Tim knew exactly why he was being watched.

"What, after being turned into a kid for two weeks? Like I said, well-rested," Tim shrugged. "Maybe I hate the little demon a little less, since I now know his piss-poor attitude isn't just from being your biological child, but from a pretty awful childhood."

"You knew that before."

"I mean, I assumed that Talia didn't treat him all that great, but, well. You're pretty alike, sometimes. Easy to forget he's not your actual, miniature angry clone," Tim said, pushing a button on his staff to make it retract.

"Hmmm."

"Got Supes waiting for you at home?" Tim asked innocently, and Bruce narrowed his eyes at him under the cowl warningly. From the too chipper look on his face, Tim knew but didn't care. Oh, yes, Batman was intimidating, unless you were talking to any of his kids.

"You weren't involved in Dick's plan." Not a question, but a statement. They were good at lying to him when he wasn't paying attention, but he was certainly paying attention now. Besides, he knew that while Tim might hatch such a hare-brained scheme whilst running on fumes, coffee, and general stubbornness, he wouldn't go through with it when he was back to his senses.

"No. In hindsight, I can sort of agree with him. Maybe not the best method, I would've gone about it in another way-"

"What way?" Bruce asked incredulously.

"Somewhere public. Get you pinned to fake-dating, seeing as you can't be close with each other without your secret identities being put under pressure, and then move on from there. I'd rather be far away from you when you finally cracked and jumped each other," Tim explained, listing on his fingers. Bruce was slightly worried he'd actually thought it through that far, suggesting Dick wasn't the only one thinking about this. Now that Bruce was in a relationship with Clark, he could see their point. "It'd be easier that way, no magic involved, just pure, sheer, nice manipulation for the greater good."

"The greater good?"

"The good of Gotham, the good of the world, the good of the universe is furthered when you and Superman are together. Everyone involved thinks it's an amazing idea."

"And why is that?" Bruce asked warningly, crossing his arms over his chest. Tim grinned, a grin that was all cheeky Robin, much too immature for Red Robin.

"Well. You're less grouchy when you get loved on a regular basis. Just an observation of mine. And supers are excellent at loving, once they

put their stubborn minds to it," Tim said, his lips taking on a wry twist. "BG can confirm."

"I did think she'd been disappearing a lot lately," Bruce said, partly to himself. Supergirl was definitely better at stealth-flight than Superboy, then. When he came around, it was like a bull running through Gotham. Supergirl hadn't even tripped any border-alarms. Or Babs let her in.

"Wow. You really haven't been paying attention lately, have you? Huh," Tim said in a surprised tone. "Figures. Otherwise you'd be breathing down some people's necks."

"Really."

"Oh, definitely. Don't worry. You'll catch up, Worlds Greatest," Tim said, patting his shoulder derisively, before grabbing his grapple and twirling the hook. "When you do, I didn't tell you *anything*." With those parting words, he hopped off the building, grapple shooting out. Bruce realized he was looking at Tim's form, analyzing the amount of strain on his shoulder, and found it immaculate. Never one to disappoint him.

Bruce let him go, resisting the quirk of his lips.

"Nightwing," he said, pressing a finger against his communicator in the cowl. "Where are you and Robin? I'm sending the batmobile. It's time for bed."

"Already?" came Dick's amused voice.

"I'm perfectly alright, father," Damian said, his voice sharp and a little shocked. "We don't need to go yet."

"It's three am, Robin," Bruce said patiently, pressing a button on his gauntlet to summon the batmobile to their comms location. "You should go back to base too, Nightwing. I'm sure if you hurry, you might get some warm milk before bed."

"RR's still out," Dick pointed out, now sounding just as incredulous as Damian.

"He is," Bruce agreed. "Go back to base. I'll give you fifteen minutes to finish up."

"That's unfair!" Damian argued angrily.

"Ten," Bruce ammended, and heard Dick's incredulous sputter. "You're out of practice. You want to explain to Penny-One why you're dead on your feet by breakfast, fine by me."

"I don't fear him! I fear nothing!" Damian raged, and there was a crackle of electricity that sounded like Nightwing's escrima sticks.

"Give us ten," Dick agreed ruefully. He was many things, but a fool wasn't one of them. He knew better than to miss breakfast just because he was tired. Bruce cut the connection, and sent their bikes home with the press of a button. Then he called Batgirl.

"Want to tell me about unauthorized metas entering and exiting Gotham without my permission?" he asked as he rolled over to the next building, using it as a springboard to shoot out his grapple for the nearest gargoyle.

"None of your- ugh- business," came Batgirl's annoyed grunt in response. "Look, B, I'm busy. Can this wait?" Bruce remained silent, waiting for an answer, and heard Babs smashing someone's head into the side of a container. There was the rapid-fire of gunshots nearby, and Steph's shout in the background. "Fine! Kara's here sometimes. Stay out of my business and I'll stay out of yours, asshole."

"If we let one in constantly, don't you think the others will come running? The rule is no metas in Gotham. You know that," he growled, because Babs really did know better than to let unauthorized metas into Gotham, and keep it a secret from him.

"Yeah, how do you think that's gonna work out, now that you and Superman are knocking boots?" she snapped at him.

"It's... different." Bruce saw how feeble an excuse that was, and nearly winced with the weakness of it as Babs snorted. New argument, fast. "I wouldn't let him operate here."

"It really isn't, B. Besides, he's Superman. You really think he'll stay put when there's someone to save?" she asked derisively. Bruce was done with his kids being rude for tonight.

"You talk to me about these sorts of things," he demanded, his voice leaving no room for argument. Bruce had a lot of patience, but Barbara going directly against his orders and their general agreement of rules wasn't acceptable, and would have to be punished. "If you want your girlfriend coming around, you talk to me, so that I can sit her down, and discuss the rules with her. If we can't come to an

agreement for this, I'll have to bench both you, and her, until we have this hashed out. *Got it*?"

"You can't do that!" Babs said incredulously.

"Of course I can," Bruce replied without hesitation, his voice entirely calm. "I'm Batman."

Barbara was furiously silent for a while, rethinking her moves, and Bruce gave her that opportunity to accept, or decline and get benched. He wouldn't compromise Gotham's security, and he'd done the same thing to Kon when he'd started dating Tim. Of course, Tim hadn't talked to him for a month after that, and had basically taken up residence in the Titans Tower, but he'd come back when Alfred had not-quite yelled at him, and Bruce had relented slightly.

"Not the two of you alone. If you're going to threaten her, I'm going to kick your ass," Barbara shot back, but she was agreeing, wasn't so much fighting him as putting on a show. Bruce's lips twitched into something resembling a smile.

"Hmmm," he agreed, and cut the call off. He'd intimidated every other Super there was. Supergirl wouldn't be a challenge. Babs would be, though.

The bats got back late, and Clark was asleep on Bruce's huge bed by that time. He barely moved when Bruce slid into bed with him, his breathing soft and silent. With the nice burn of a good patrol in his muscles, and the dull throb of hurt in his bruised ribs, Bruce was ready to just collapse and sleep for a year. He'd really gotten too used to a larger amount of sleep when the kids had been younger, he needed to readjust.

The moment he was on the bed, lying on his side, Clark sighed, and shifted backwards until his back was pressed against Bruce's front. The deep, even breahthing suggested he was still asleep, and his warmth was too comfortable to pass up on. The manor was one of the few places where Bruce rarely felt watched, and so he felt a little more okay with Clark's display of blatant trust here in his safe place, in the dark.

Carefully, he curled an arm around Clark's lower ribs, and Clark made a happy noise in his sleep, burrowing into his arms. Ridiculous, really. Even more ridiculous was how it made Bruce's heart rattle in his

ribcage. Bruce buried his face in the space right where Clark's hair ended at the nape of his neck, just breathing. It would get cloying after a while, but right now, Bruce enjoyed the smell of Clark, the firm, smooth planes of his stomach, and his too-trusting nature.

It was probably what eventually lulled him to sleep.

When Bruce woke up, Clark's hand was tangled up in his hair, and he'd turned around in his embrace. Clark's morning breath was coming in little gusts against his cheek, and when he cracked an eye open, he found Clark looking at him sleepily. The sun streaming through the windows was too slanted to be anything but early morning, and Bruce nearly growled in annoyance.

"Good morning, sunshine," Clark said gently, and Bruce buried his face in the pillows, where it was blessedly dark and silent. Clark's gentle fingertips rubbed against his scalp soothingly, and Bruce let himself relax a little further into the darkness. That was, until Clark nudged against his hip, turning him over and sitting to straddle him. "Hey."

"You do realize I haven't had more than four hours of sleep, and breakfast is at least four more hours away?" Bruce grunted, his eyes still slits, like he was trying to hold on to whatever tiredness he'd been feeling until he'd woken up from Clark looking at him. "What are you even doing up?"

"Well, I got to bed pretty early I guess. Besides, I'm naturally a morning person! Rise with the sun, and all that," Clark fucking beamed at him, like anyone had the right to be so awake at this time of day. Bruce pressed his lips to Clark's to shut him up, and carefully and strategically rolled them over, getting temporarily distracted when Clark's hands went for his boxers.

Finally, he released Clark's lips, nuzzled his neck, and collapsed on top of him with the full brunt of his weight.

"You realize I could push you off without even breaking a sweat, right?" Clark grinned. The terrifying Batman grumbled like his angry toddler had done only a few days ago, and Clark chuckled.

"Shut up or take your warmth and leave," Bruce groaned, wrapping his one arm around Clark's shoulder and tangling their legs together, obviously showing exactly what option he'd prefer.

"Alright, grumpy bat," Clark laughed, wrapping his arms around Bruce, and tuning into the languid beating of his heart. When Bruce's

breathing was yet again deep and slow, Clark expanded his hearing, rubbing his hands over Bruce's shoulder muscles.

He heard the slightly speedier heartbeat of Damian in the bedroom three doors down and opposite of the one they were in. Children tended to have a little faster heartbeats than adults, but since Damian was so fit as well, his heartbeat was like an adult's, mostly. His and Bruce's heart had the same sound to them, which he always found lovely to listen to. Lois said he couldn't possibly tell who was who just from a heartbeat, but Clark spent a fair amount of time listening to the bats' hearts, and Damian's was almost as soothing as Bruce's.

Dick was asleep in his own bed, lightly snoring, and Tim was knocked out half-way onto his bed, if his slightly labored but deep breathing was any indication. Cassandra was in her own bed too, but Steph was there with her. He tilted his head backwards and blinked his X-ray vision into view. Stephanie and Cassandra were sleeping back to back, and Cass was practically curled up into a little ball. Their breathing was soft and slow, however, meaning neither was having nightmares, just seeking comfort in general.

Curled protectively around his own bat, Clark could understand that, running a thumb over the crease between Bruce's eyebrows that was always so prominent when had his Batman-face on without the cowl. He decided he could sleep just a little more, with the comforting weight of Bruce pressing him into the mattress.

By the time it was breakfast, Clark woke a still grumpy Bruce up, wrapped him up in a bathrobe, and offered to carry him downstairs if he kept grumbling. That spurred Bruce into a state of awakeness, and he led Clark down the stairs and into the dining room. Tim was already at the table, spooning cereal into his mouth without looking away from his phone.

"Good morning Tim," Clark said.

"Uh huh," Tim said, not even looking up from his phone.

"Tim," Bruce said a little warningly, and the young man shoved another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

"Uh huh," Tim agreed, just as Alfred appeared from the kitchen, holding a tray with two mugs on them and a glass of orange juice.

"I think you'll find this household has no other 'good morning' greeting than a few grunts, Master Clark," Alfred said, sounding a little disgruntled. "I've tried to teach them better manners, but they're simply incorrigible."

"That's not true," Bruce protested as Alfred placed a cup of tea next to his plate, along with the glass of orange juice, and a cup of coffee next to Clark.

"Thank you, Alfred," Clark said sweetly, and then raised an eyebrow at Bruce in challenge. Alfred nodded his acknowledgement before going back into the kitchen. "It isn't?"

"It's not my fault you wake up at a frankly unreasonable hour," Bruce scoffed, taking a sip of his wonderful green tea.

"Kryptonians rise with the sun. Something about their circadian rhythm," Tim hummed distantly. "Kon does it too, which is, like, the epitome of annoying."

"Oh, yeah? How have you solved that problem?" Clark asked, sounding amused as he picked his coffee up and took a sip. Tim's head snapped up, and he blinked a few times in shock, like he'd been caught. Bruce blinked back, immediately uncomfortably aware of what teenagers usually did at any opportune moment. Oh, Clark would not want to hear this.

"Um," Tim hedged as some color rose on his cheeks, tipping his head from side to side. Clark didn't seem to notice, simply smiling. "Usually just kick him out of the room."

"Hmmm," Bruce agreed as there was the sound of someone descending the stairs. Everyone turned just in time to see Dick stretching like a rubberband towards the ceiling, his shirt riding up and exposing at least half his midriff. He yawned and ruffled his own hair, making fingerguns at Clark.

"Sup supes. Hey, Tim, did Babs get back to you on that thing you asked her to check out before you turned in?" he asked, plopping down across from Clark, right by the head of the table.

"Yeah, I'm checking it out tonight. Are you staying in town?"

"Maybe for one more day, if you need a hand?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice," Tim agreed, turning back to his phone. Dick

smiled wide, and turned to Bruce.

"And how are you doing this beautiful morning, B?" he asked very politely, which immediately made Bruce's eyes narrow.

"What did you do?" he sighed.

"Nothing! I'm just genuinely asking!" he promised sweetly. "I can't believe you'd ever suspect me of anything." Tim snorted at that, and Bruce scoffed.

"Yeah, that went over well last time, not suspecting you," Clark said with a soft smile, laying his hand out on the table. Bruce placed his on top of Clark's, still looking at Dick with his eyes narrowed. Except for a twinkle in his eyes, Dick didn't react, instead turning with his arm on the backrest and looking out into the corridor.

"Don't drag your feet, lil D! I'll eat all the waffles before you!" he called out, and Damian appeared, wearing a bright green hoodie and a pair of sweatpants and looking decidedly just as grumpy as his dad.

"If you so much as breathe on one of Pennyworth's waffles before I get at least three, you will *perish*," Damian seethed, his voice unforgiving as he sleepily climbed up on one of the chairs. Titus trotted in after him, crawling in underneath the table and popping his huge nose up to lick the tired Damian in the face.

"Remind me, how late did you stay out again?" Bruce said, pinning both Damian and Dick with an annoyed look.

"Only, like, forty-five minutes after you told us to go home," Dick protested, digging his fingertips into the muscles in his shoulder and leaning back against the back of the chair to yawn.

"Right. And how great of an idea was that, would you say?" Bruce asked, unrelenting. Damian crossed his arms over his chest in defiance as Dick reached for the Froot Loops standing on the dining room table.

"We stopped two muggers with knives," the younger boy stated proudly, and Bruce sighed, taking his hand back from Clark to press his fingertips against his temples.

"Yes, and that was very good, Damian. I just feel like a broken record yelling at you about knowing your limits. Four more nights where you stay out too late, what then? You'll get yourself killed dealing with

just a petty thief with a knife. And you-" Dick blinked in surprise, half a water-melon slice in his mouth and with the pitcher of milk in his hand, ready to pour. "*You* should have gone home too. Because of you, all of you have been out of commission for the past two weeks; you should at least take responsibility for that, and go home and sleep when I goddamn tell you to."

"You always let Drake stay out later than me!" Damian exclaimed, obviously enraged by Bruce trying to tell him to slow down.

"Not only is he older than you, he can also push himself further than you can on less sleep. Not that that doesn't mean he can go without it," Bruce added, giving Tim a stern look. Tim rolled his eyes, and leaned back in his chair, pushing the half-finished cereal away from him.

"I'm far better than *Drake*!" Damian sputtered, sounding like Bruce was insulting his very existence by saying Tim could do something better than him. The older boy rolled his eyes, and opened his mouth to argue, but Clark was quicker.

"My ma always used to say if you don't eat your greens, do your chores, and sleep well, you're not gonna grow up big and strong," he interjected, an all eyes turned to him, like they'd forgotten he was even there. Damian sneered.

"Would make sense. I haven't seen Drake anything green during my time in America, and he's about the size of a hobgoblin," he said nastily.

"You wanna talk hobgoblin, take a look in the mirror, pipsqueak," Tim said, flipping Damian the bird, and immediately Damian was on his feet on his chair, and Dick was flinging a hand out to stop him, just as Tim rose from his chair, and Bruce did too, ready to stop them. Clark just looked bewildered, having forgotten that this entire family was always a breath away from coming to blows.

"Hrm hrm," came a noise from the doorway before they could get any closer than shouting, where Alfred stood with a slight frown on his face and a huge stack of waffles. "What have we said about fighting at the dining table, young masters?"

"Only do it when we're eating soup so nobody can get stabbed and bleed on the nice table-cloths?" Dick suggested with a slightly forced smile. From the look on Alfred's face, he didn't find the joke particularly funny, but Dick kept the smile up anyway. Tim looked

sour, and Bruce placed his hands on the table-top, exhaling through his nose and looking very much like Batman without the costume on. Clark scratched the back of his neck in flushed embarrassment at what seeing Bruce in that power stance did to him. Not entirely appropriate breakfast conversation with his kids.

"Take your seats," Alfred chided, without dignifying Dick with an answer. Damian was put back on his butt a little forcefully by Dick, and Tim slumped back down on his chair. Bruce slowly sat down too, giving Dick a look that said 'if they go for it again, I'll grab Tim, you grab Damian'. "Master Timothy, it's either the cereal or it's several waffles. You can not get out of eating something today."

Tim grumbled, but when Alfred pushed his bowl of cereal back to him, he picked the spoon back up. The waffles were distributed, with Damian snatching the plate out from under Dick's hands, giving him a warning look. Bruce didn't take a single waffle, instead picking up the newspaper and not giving the food a single glance when Alfred came out with more fruit and some syrup and cream.

After that, the meal progressed in relative silence, everyone chewing their waffles and with Tim's phone chirping now and then. Bruce and Clark shared the newspaper, and Clark's calf was pressed up against Bruce's throughout the whole breakfast, until the reporter's own phone went off.

It was a message from Lois, telling his loved-up ass to get over to her apartment so she could bounce some ideas off him.

"Oh, I gotta go," Clark sighed as he stood up from the table. He was wearing a pair of Bruce's pants and his own undershirt, but while he would love to fly off in them, not only would Lois badger him about how good of a lay Batman was, but he would also never hear the end of it. He'd already given B enough ammunition by nearly flying off with Damian in his forgetfullness.

"Are you sure, Master Clark? We do still have some more waffles left, if you'd like," Alfred offered, a tray with food in hand that he was bringing up to Cassandra.

"No, no, I'm good, thank you. It's a wonder I can even move right now. Hey, I'll see you tonight, yeah?" Clark asked, leaning down to gently kiss Bruce's lips.

"Hmmm," Bruce said in agreement into the kiss. Clark cupped the nape of his neck and smiled, looking into his lover's wonderfully clear blue

eyes until Dick squealed. Then he pulled away, and Bruce dove back behind the paper.

"Bye Dames," Clark said, ruffling his hair as he walked past him and out into the corridor, and Damian only grumbled into his cereal, no threats, only a tired yawn. "Bye guys!"

"Bye Clark," Dick and Tim said in unison, and Alfred placed a plate with scrabled eggs next to Bruce's cup of tea, a sort of self-satisfied quirk twisting his lips.

"What?" Bruce grumbled.

"Nothing at all, Master Bruce. Why?"

"You're looking smug."

"I'm merely happy that you are happy, sir," Alfred said, moving over to Tim and tipping him back towards the backrest, only to snatch his phone out of his hands.

"Hey!" Tim whined, reaching for his phone.

"Mister Kent is not more important than food, Master Timothy," Alfred chided as he placed the phone on the tray. "Eat a waffle. If not that, at least some watermelon. You need the water."

"So that's what this is about. You're smug about Clark," Bruce realized. "What do you want me to say? That I'll listen to you more? That you're always right?"

"That would be lovely, sir, truly moving," Alfred said without even looking over his shoulder at him when he disappeared into the kitchen again to fetch a coffee-thermos for Clark to bring with him.

Damian's math and physics tutors showed up a few hours later, and Bruce retreated to his study. Cassandra, Tim, and Stephanie stayed in Cass' bed watching movies until the afternoon, and Dick disappeared into the city over the day, apparently enjoying his freedom and being an adult again.

Bruce did business and sent a memo to his secretary that he was coming into the office tomorrow, all of them were back from Aspen, it had been fun, and Tim had gotten stuck in one of the skiing-lifts. Of

course, it was just to set the chatter flowing again.

About an hour before tea-time, he emerged from his study, and walked around the house until he found somebody. This time, it was Damian and Alfred he encountered first. He peeked into one of the sitting rooms on the lower floors, the one next to the sitting room Damian and his tutors usually used, and found Damian on the couch, with Alfred crouching next to him. Titus was nowhere to be found, but Alfred the Cat had curled up against Damian's feet.

"Is he okay?" Bruce questioned and took a step into the room. He doubted Damian had been hurt during patrol, he would've noticed that. Wouldn't he? Damian was good at lying but he wasn't *that* good. Or maybe Bruce was just more observant than to fall for his lies about his general health.

Alfred looked up and over his shoulder, putting a finger to his mouth in a universal hush gesture.

"I believe the young master is not used to having precious little sleep after his time as a young toddler," Alfred announced silently, smiling slightly.

Damian was curled up on the couch like a little cat, fast asleep and with his trigonometry homework smushed underneath him. He did look peacefully asleep, earbuds in his ears and his iPod in his hoodie-pocket. Both of them watched in silence the gentle rise and fall of Damian's ribcage, until Bruce cleared his throat a little.

"I'll carry him up to bed," he offered.

"No need, Master Bruce. I'm quite capable," Alfred said, a tinge of fondness in his tone that made Bruce smile secretively to himself. Gently, Alfred curled his arms underneath Damian's small frame, and lifted easily. Considering Alfred could lift Bruce when he needed to, Damian was no issue.

Cradled like a little sleeping baby, Alfred carried Damian out of the room, his posture slightly curved, as if to surround Damian protectively. Bruce's heart ached as he watched the two of them go, and he settled down on the couch Damian had just vacated, smoothing the homework out and placing it on the table. Alfred the cat walked up to him and curled up in his lap.

"Hmmm," Bruce said, his lips curling into a small smile as he scratched it's chin lovingly. "You wouldn't run off into the night without my

permission, would you? No. You're a better cat than that."

At that, Alfred the cat promptly fell asleep on his lap, and Bruce was trapped, deciding to check in with Diana and look up some JL news. He hadn't properly scolded Zatanna yet for transforming his children into, well, smaller children, and he added that to his to-do list. No doubt, she was in another dimension right now, or at least hiding from him. Wouldn't be surprising, or unjustified. Bruce was going to lecture the hell out of her the moment she set foot back on this Earth. Or, most probably, the Watchtower.

Either way, he was going to lecture her into the next century about privacy and improper use of magic, and consent, and she would listen to him, or he'd have to find another magic user to tie her down, and he was really pretty goddamn sick of magic at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

hnnngh I'm a fucking idiot, I'm sorry!!! I'm horrible at writing endings, but this isn't one! Still!!! I know I keep saying I'm done, but then I go to write it and wham bam, it turns into a hundred billion more words than I thought it would be. So sorry, but there's still one!! more!! goddamn!! chapter!!
Christ. Look, I'm also sorry this chapter is late, but I've been trying to squeeze everything into one chapter and it's just been... messy whilst I tried to figure out how to do this, until I figured out I couldn't fit everything into one chapter.
Anyway, thank you for being amazing, patient, loving, wonderful humans, I can't believe you exist and make my day better!!!! thank you for your cheerful comments and wonderfulness!
<3<3<3

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite the fact that Clark had changed clothes, taken several showers, and fixed his hair since he'd been with Bruce, Lois still noticed and hassled him until he told her exactly how good Batman was in bed, which, really, Lois was an investigative reporter, they were as bad as police detectives, and she was simultaneously one of his best friends, meaning Clark had little to no chance to resist her.

She finally let him go after they'd gone over some of her rough drafts and Clark could say without Lois even questioning him that she would win the next Pulitzer, without a doubt. He flew over to the mansion, feeling relaxed after hanging out with Lois, but still sort of missing the chaos around here.

Clark landed in the garden by the patio, smiling up at the sun and loving the feeling of the rays on his face. He pulled his glasses off without thinking, sighing to himself.

"Actual sun in Gotham? Rare," came Tim's mildly surprised voice from the patio door, where he stood with just a one of Kon's Superboy-shirts on and a pair of very short shorts. "Take your time, I guess, but you'll be missing tea time."

"Sorry. Gotta take what you can get, when you're in Gotham," Clark agreed, feeling his shoulders relax even more as he soaked in the sun. He saw out of the corner of his eye Tim turn to go back inside. "Hey, um. Hold up."

Tim turned right back around, an eyebrow raising. His hair was tucked behind his ears, and while his posture was relaxed and calm, his eyes were still sharp and glinting with intelligence. Whenever he wasn't looking at Clark, he was glancing around them, as if checking to see if there was anyone around who could've seen him fly in. Bats and always remaining vigilant.

"Stand with me for a moment?" he asked a little awkwardly, and Tim's other eyebrow rose. However, he didn't question Clark, just carefully padding out on the patio and standing next to him.

"What's up, Clark?" the young man asked, looking at him with serene

eyes, and Clark felt the words get stuck in his throat. Nervously, he scratched his neck.

"Well, um... Look, I know you didn't have all that much say in this, but I was just wondering..." Clark cleared his throat, and Tim pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest.

"If I'm cool with you guys dating?" he added helpfully, and Clark silently damned how easily his ears got red.

"Yeah," he finally croaked out. Tim smirked at him.

"I pushed Damian into a vase earlier this morning, and it broke. Bruce barely batted an eyelash. Keep doing what you're doing. I need it for my sanity," he said, patting Clark on the shoulder. He whipped his phone out of his pocket as he turned towards the patio doors again. "Alright, now we're really not going to get any tea if we stay out here for a second longer. But, hey, maybe let him seduce you a little? Make him work for it. He's got the money, and he needs the challenge, and you definitely deserve it for putting up with him for, I dunno, a billion years."

Clark reluctantly walked out of the sun, and first then caught up to Tim's words.

"We're not that old," he sputtered with a laugh.

"Might as well be," Tim said as he lead the way up to the library. "Hey, Ma Kent wants you to call her." Clark's stomach dropped.

"Oh my god," he gaped, stopping halfway up the staircase. Tim stopped too, and turned his head to look at him skeptically. "I haven't told my mom!"

"Yeah, no. She knows though," Tim agreed, continuing upwards. "I'm not missing tea just because you haven't told your mom you're dating Batman."

Quickly, Clark pulled his phone out of his pocket, and hurried into the guest bedroom he'd been staying in lately, closing the door after him as he dialed a familiar number.

Ma didn't scold him as much as he thought she would. Mostly, she was just happy they'd finally seen sense, and then told him to invite Bruce and the kids over for dinner at the next best opportunity.

"And bring Cassandra and Alfred this time. I've got a new recipe I need him to taste for me," she encouraged, and Clark smiled at the sound of her voice.

"Hey, maybe I'll fly out tomorrow, is there anything from the city you want me to bring?" he asked, and she clicked her tongue in thought.

"How are the Waynes' roses looking?" she asked distantly, and there was the slam of the screen-door closing, and the creaking of the porch.

"Rosy," Clark joked as he looked out through the window at the lovely blooming roses in the garden. He didn't even really know how his mom knew they had roses.

"Ask Alfred if you can take some of the white ones. Ours have been hopped on by bugs, and I'd love to dry some," she sighed.

"Want me to pick up some bugspray too?" he asked, and turned around just as Bruce appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Clark smiled at him, and was rewarded with a small, however genuine smile back.

God, he looked good, wearing a simple gray t-shirt and casual slacks. His hair was smoothed back a little, a little damp, and from the musky smell of him, it came from sweat. It was a pretty warm day, and Clark had zero clue how Bruce wasn't sweating to death in black, long pants. Of course, the day Bruce Wayne was caught in anything but stylish dark clothing would be the day he died, so Clark shouldn't be so surprised.

"No need, I've got Conner in town, picking it up for me as we speak," she beamed, and Bruce stepped into the room, closing the door behind himself. "He's a good boy, that one. Head and heart in the right place."

"Yeah, ma, I know. Don't know what I'd do without you there for him," he exhaled as Bruce stalked closer, still with that small, wonderful smile. "Should we be expecting him later?"

"If he finishes his chores before dinner, he can head over to Tim's, so we'll see," she stated diplomatically, and Clark huffed out a laugh as Bruce's hands squeezed his waist gently, before sliding down to his hips. His free hand came up to cup the back of Bruce's neck and return the little squeeze.

"Alright. Well, see ya'll tomorrow, then?"

"Don't forget those roses, Clark," his mother reminded him patiently.

"'Course not, Ma." There was the sound of some boards falling and net being shredded, and his mother huffed.

"It's them darn chickens again. I'll call!" she hurried out, before there was the telltale click of her hanging up on him.

"Is she alright?" Bruce asked, his voice rumbling and smooth, and Clark blanked for a second, just looking at his sharp jaw, the slight curve of his lip, the full cupid's bow. Damn. The curve turned into a slightly wider smile, and Clark internally scrambled to get his bearings. "Earth to Clark."

"Oh, you think you're the first to make alien jokes?" he groaned, and Bruce's low chuckle was a thing of beauty, a wonderful tune that lit up Clark's insides.

"No. I just make the best ones."

"You don't think Lois has pulled that one a billion times already?"

"Damn. I'll have to figure out a new one," Bruce mused.

"Please don't," Clark sighed, his hand sliding from his slightly sticky neck down to his upper arm. "Hi."

"Hi," Bruce breathed back, leaning in to press a wonderfully sweet kiss to Clark's lips. Honestly, he has no idea how many world disasters he must have averted to deserve this. No clue.

"Feels like we used to have more intelligent conversations," Clark hummed, cupping Bruce's strong jaw and letting the pads of his thumbs brush against his sharp cheekbones.

"I can have intelligent conversations," Bruce agreed, shoving his hand in underneath Clark's pants and grabbing a whole handful of his ass. Very heartily, for a man with his children in the other room.

"Uh-" Clark said, a little stunned as Bruce's other hand followed it's twin down under. Sort of hard to concentrate when he had that little self-satisfied smirk on his lips. Goddammit, that was the same face he made when he'd managed to outdo some other team member, and Clark was never going to be able to see that smirk again without being at least a little turned on. Sucks to have a spandex-suit sometimes.

"I'd just rather be doing this right now. I'll talk about stocks, the new recruits at JL, the fact that you need to bring Kara to the Watchtower, all of it, if you'd like, but I'd really rather," he pressed a couple of kisses to Clark's jaw, "just blow you now."

"Um- I- wha- wait, what was that about Kara?" Clark asked as though through a fog, begging his last two braincells to work together just for a moment. Fuck, Bruce had deftly unbuttoned his pants before he'd even realized, sliding his hands out only to gently shove him onto the bed.

"Kara and Batgirl. Dating. So I need to talk to her on fairly neutral ground, which would be the Watchtower. You know, I'm starting to think there's a pattern to this. Tim and Kon, Babs and Kara, me and you. I'm gonna have to add more metas to the list of admittances, and you know how I hate that," Bruce said conversationally, as if he hadn't just shoved Clark's pants down his thighs, frowning at the scratchy polyester.

"I think it's 'cause we put up a bit of a fight," Clark said contemplatively. "Bats like that. Makes you all hot all over." Bruce snorted, shoving his hand into Clark's boxers and giving his dick a smooth stroke. Clark let out a surprised groan.

"Is that so?"

"Yeaaah," Clark breathed out, his head falling back as he got up on his elbows. Bruce was on the bed with him, pinning his hips down with his strong arm. Both knew Clark could without a doubt break his grip, but it was more about trust than it was about who can do what. "Hey, what happened to tea time?" he croaked out.

"You wanna go out there now, like this?" Bruce asked, amused. Clark blinked a little at the sight of Bruce between his legs, and felt his mouth getting dry.

"Maybe not," Clark agreed, and Bruce smirked, going to pull him out of the confines of his underwear, when he froze. "What?"

"Hmmm." Bruce considered who could be the cause of the buzzing in his pants pocket, and wondered if he could put it off. It could be an informant, it could be a disaster going down, it could be the JL... Or it could be worse. "I'm going to need you to hold that thought."

Clark groaned when he pulled his hand out of Clark's undies, and instead pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Unknown.

Well, fuck. Of course she'd call right now. He had half a mind just to toss the phone across the room, crawl into bed with Clark and not leave. However, instead, he sucked it up and took the call.

"I'm a little busy right now, could this wait?" he asked sharply, and could hear the quirk of Talia's lips on the other end of the line.

"I heard our son is back to normal," she mused, and Bruce frowned. Clark immediately sat up on the bed, an alarmed look on his face. Bruce remained on his front between Clark's legs, still pretty relaxed. He didn't feel any other eyes than Clark's watching him right now, and Talia would've tripped his alarms. He was paranoid for a goddamn reason, alright?

"He is."

"Then you will honor our deal. Tonight, seven pm. Restaurant of your choice," she crooned, and Bruce pursed his lips.

"You injured Cassandra," he pointed out, and Talia huffed a breath of frustration.

"The deal was 'don't try to take over the world', and I didn't. Besides, like I told you, I dealt with the one who interfered," she said, practically waving him off. "Are you not a man of your word, beloved?"

Bruce considered that. He lied very often, or just didn't let things be said. He wasn't sure he'd broken any promises lately, if only because he didn't promise things anymore. Talia was always a raging storm whenever he brushed her off, and out of sheer pettiness he wanted to do that now. However, his kids may be back to normal, but they were still a little out of practice, and Alfred always did hate whenever Talia decided to attack the manor.

"I'll text you the place," he decided finally, and hung up on her. Then he gently pressed a hand against Clark's washboard abs, and met the sky-blue eyes. "Now. Where were we?"

"You really want to- After that?" Clark asked incredulously, waving his hand in the air to encompass the weird conversation he just had with his ex.

"I'm not going to let Talia ruin my sex-life, Kal. I'm very much still in

the mood, but I'll stop if you want, of course," Bruce agreed, spreading his fingers to line up with the V on Clark's lower stomach. God, that line of hair disappearing into his tighty-whities was really distracting, right between his thumbs, and Bruce had the sudden urge to just follow it all the way down to that pretty cock. Would've been even hotter without the silly underwear though.

Bruce was seriously going to torch Clark's entire closet, all of his underwear included, and just buy him all new clothing. Clark in a fitted suit would look like more of a god than he did in the Superman suit, as long as Bruce could get him to stand up straight. Clark doing a Superman-pose in a charcoal pinstripe Armani suit would be downright pornographic. Bruce had an amazing tailor. He'd make pants for Clark that would accentuate his wonderfully pert little ass.

"No, no, I'm good," Clark hissed as Bruce palmed his cock through the underwear. "As you were."

Bruce laughed and helped Clark get out of his pants and underwear, already planning a 'misshap' that could make them both disappear.

"Maybe I shouldn't go," Bruce reflected later, staring up at the ceiling in thought. Clark was curled up against him, head on his chest and sated after a few very good orgasms. He'd missed tea time, but if he got up soon, he might get some tea anyway. Or not. Clark wasn't missing a second of this snuggling unless he really had to.

"Go where?" Clark mumbled, his curls flopped over Bruce's chest and a little tickly. Bruce isn't normally ticklish, because he thinks it's a little ridiculous, but he also usually doesn't come three times in less than twelve hours, so maybe he's just over-sensitized by all the touching.

"To dinner," Bruce said thoughtfully, brushing Clark's hair back and getting a kiss pressed to his sternum in return.

"Hey, no, look," Clark sighed, turning his head so they were meeting eyes. "You did make a deal. Talia takes that sort of thing seriously. She'd probably pull a more dangerous stunt than a dinner if you don't go."

"I'd really rather spend the evening with you than her," Bruce pointed out, and got a sunny grin for that, Clark's incredible eyes glittering with mirth. The flush on his cheeks hadn't really disappeared from his cheeks yet, and Bruce enjoyed how rumpled he looked with a

surprising ferocity.

"You better," Clark challenged, and Bruce smirked at him, drawing him in closer.

"Without a doubt," he exhaled against Clark's cheek, and the super shuddered a little.

"I'll be waiting for you right here, give you something to look forward to," Clark enticed, and Bruce grimaced.

"With Talia, it might take a couple of hours. You really don't need to stay here if you have other things to do," he said dismissively, and Clark's stomach dropped a little.

"Oh. Yeah, okay," Clark agreed a little dejectedly, but Bruce was already scheming in his head and looking up at the ceiling, trying to find the easiest restaurant that he could take her to without getting seen as Bruce Wayne and simultaneously have one of the kids do surveilance. Normally he would've picked Cassandra because she wasn't constantly commenting on what was happening, but maybe he'd have to take Tim this time. He was too busy planning to notice how Clark's smile didn't reach all the way to his eyes that time. "Hey, do you think Alfred would be angry if I took some roses?"

"Roses?" Bruce echoed, looking back at Clark again. "For your mother?"

"Yeah," Clark said, shifting up onto his elbow. Bruce hummed.

"I think he'd be fine with that. You should ask him though. As has been previously stated, I don't run this place, I just live here," he hummed. Clark laughed softly, pressing a kiss to Bruce's slightly stubbly cheek.

"Of course you run the place, baby," he promised, not really wanting to get up and out of bed but feeling a little like he should be. It was already five-thirty, and Bruce still had to make reservations and take a shower. A tiny, very possessive part of Clark didn't want him to shower at all; wanted him to show up at the fancy restaurant smelling like sweat, bedsheets, and *Clark*, like that would ward Talia off of him.

Bruce chuckled as he crawled over to the edge of the bed, rolling out of bed and stretching. Clark's eyes followed the line of his body without hesitation, seeing the hickey on his shoulder and the long stretch of scarred back move.

"Oh god, I'm more an old man than baby," Bruce stated thoughtfully, moving towards the bathroom.

"Want me to call you daddy?" Clark asked innocently, and Bruce whipped around, pointing a stern finger at him. Clark burst into laughter at the look on his face.

"Don't you dare," Bruce growled. "I have more kids than I can count, you are not one of them."

"How 'bout honey, then? Sweetheart? Sweetums? Apple of my eye?" Clark suggested, still chortling under his breath.

"That's so corny, I'm going to hurl, you sap," Bruce chuckled as he stopped in the doorway to the bathroom and turned a little. "Talk to Alfred about the roses on the way out, and say hi to your mom for me."

"She wants all of you over for dinner," Clark hurried to get out and sat up in bed. The billionaire disappearing into the bathroom meant Clark had to leave, and he didn't really want to, not yet. Bruce raised an eyebrow at him.

"Really? All of us? That's a considerable amount of people," he pointed out. "I don't know if that's a great idea."

"Just for dinner. She insists."

"Hmmm. Tell her I'll think about it," he agreed, and finally disappeared into the bathroom. Clark remained in the bed for a moment, until he heard the sound of the shower turning on.

Gingerly, he rolled out of bed, marvelling at the fact that he actually felt a bit of a burn in his muscles. He really needed some sun. He'd fly above the clouds on the way back to his apartment. He didn't need to be with Bruce all the time. Maybe he'd go up to the Watchtower, sparr with Diana, chat with Flash, have dinner with J'onn.

When he stood up, his still slick thighs rubbed together, and he grimaced. First he needed a good shower. Quickly, he slipped into his clothes, and left to find Alfred.

The butler cut him a small bouquet of white roses and offered him to stay for dinner. Clark felt like he was hovering, though, like he should be gone already, and while Alfred's offer seemed genuine, he was a little too twitchy to accept. Instead, he flew home to his apartment,

and tried not to focus on the fact that Bruce was dressing up to meet his very attractive, very murderous ex.

Tim had grumbled, but gotten all of his things together for watching over the restaurant. Dick had argued that Talia was a murderous bitch, and Cassandra had frowned pretty angrily at him, signing that he was being stupid, but Bruce saw this as an opportunity to get Talia off his and Gotham's back for the next couple of months. He had enough problems, he didn't need Talia and her dinner-date hanging over him too.

Alfred had picked out a navy suit for him, and a tie, but now that Bruce stood there in his underwear, he decided against the neutral tie, and decided to just go a little bare-necked. Alfred would disapprove, but he didn't want to give Talia anything to pull on, because that was the sort of shit she would attempt to pull, just to be petty.

He was too focused on thinking about what Talia could want, except for his attention, to notice Damian standing in the doorway. Once he did notice, he glanced over, and had a bit of a déjà vu-feeling to when he was little and he'd watch his parents get dressed before they went out to some gala he was too young to go with them to.

"Come in, Damian," he offered as he hauled the pants further up, but not buttoning them. His shirt was lying on the bed, and he reached for it as Damian took maybe four very determined steps into the room, scowling for all he was worth.

"You're going to see Mother?" the boy asked, arms crossed over his chest.

"I am," Bruce replied, sliding his shoulders into his crisp white shirt.

"Why?"

"We decided on it a while back," he stated, buttoning his shirt up. Alfred had left out a pair of cufflinks on the dresser, and Bruce slid them through the holes in the sleeves. "I might be a while."

"What does she want?" his son questioned.

"I don't know, Damian. To talk?"

"You're not going alone, are you?"

"No. I'm bringing Tim."

"I want to come too," he insisted, and Bruce shook his head before the words were even fully out of his son's mouth, stepping into his shoes at the same time.

"No. I don't want to give her any reason to do anything drastic. He'll just be nearby on a rooftop, not inside with me."

"I want to go," Damian demanded, and Bruce took a deep breath, turning to look at his angry eleven-year-old.

"Damian," he pleaded, placing his hands on his small shoulders. "Please. You don't think this is hard enough on me as it is? She had you in her grasp, when you were a toddler. She was holding you and she could've made off with you if I hadn't been paying attention. It was too close. I'm not giving her that opportunity again."

"It's different now, father, I can fight her off!" Damian urged, tugging angrily at the loose hem of his silk shirt. A surprisingly child-like gesture, and nothing he would ever do near any of his brothers. Bruce was touched. Despite the time they've spent together, there's still a niggling little part of Bruce's inner that chafes at the thought of Damian liking Dick more than his own father. He doesn't blame him, not really, but it... Stirs feelings of inadequacy he doesn't know how to handle.

"I'm not questioning your ability to fight," he explained patiently, looking down at Damian's angry frown and angrily furrowed brow, and with that, the sweet way his nose had wrinkled as a result. "I'm saying it would distract me. I don't want Talia near you right now. I don't know what she wants, I don't want to be distracted by the thought of her grabbing you just because she's in town and it's convenient. Can you understand why I don't want you there?"

Damian still looked very very displeased, but he crossed his arms over his chest and frowned, if possible, even harder.

"...Yes," he finally agreed as he glared down at Bruce's shined and polished patent leather loafers. "Doesn't mean I think you're right."

"That always seems to be the general consensus in this goddamn household," Bruce said fondly, cupping the back of Damian's head to make him look up at him. "It's not that I don't trust you and your ability to defend yourself. Your mother is just a very clever and very unpredictable woman. I get anxious whenever she comes by. In light

of recent events, I don't think that's very unreasonable."

"*Anxious*?" Damian said, astonished. Bruce let his lips twitch into a small smile.

"Courage isn't the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man isn't the one who doesn't feel fear, but he who conquers that fear." Damian rolled his eyes at him, as he always did when Bruce tried to make him understand things he already thought he had figured out. "I don't have a problem admitting Talia appearing and demanding dinner makes me nervous. It doesn't make me weak to admit, it makes me smart. It lets the rest of you know you should be on your guard."

Damian pursed his lips at him, but sighed.

"Don't bring Drake. He's useless. Use Kal instead. He can listen in and he's faster than Drake, should mother attempt anything," he finally grunted, overly dismissively, like he was trying to pass his comment off as distant. Bruce's ears perked up at the use of 'Kal' rather than a barked 'Kent', or 'Superman', but he knew better than to blurt it out in surprise. Huh. Maybe Clark had really gotten through to him when they had their little talk, then.

"Tim will do just fine, Damian. Besides, Clark went home. I'm pretty sure he's going over to his mother's place tomorrow, and he needs to be up early for that. I don't want you or Dick out on patrol before I've given you the all-clear. *Understood*?" he pressed.

Damian opened his mouth, probably to protest, and then he closed it again, thinking it through. He was getting better at that.

"Fine," he sniffed, tipping his nose up.

"Good," Bruce said firmly, shifting his shirt into his pants and zipping up. "Could you hand me my jacket, Damian?"

Grudgingly, Damian crawled up on the bed to grab the hanger, and pulled until he could hop off the bed again. He held the suit jacket up to him, and Bruce shifted into it, buttoning the first button and moving to the mirror.

He checked that his hair still looked good, and sighed to himself.

"You're not trying to impress mother, are you?" Damian asked him incredulously, and Bruce huffed.

"No, Damian, but Bruce Wayne has a certain image, and the place where we're eating is pretty fancy. It wouldn't be proper for me to go there looking like a slob," he said, fixing his perfectly firm collar. Bless Alfred and ironing Tuesdays. "Alright. It's showtime. Is Tim in the cave?"

"He's not up here at least. Maybe the Earth's swallowed him. Oh, what a happy day that would be," Damian growled, stomping out of Bruce's room and down the hall towards his own room.

Chapter End Notes

Am I actually serious that there's another chapter? Yes. I can definitively say now that there will be 31 chapters, which sort of pisses me off, but otherwise chapter thirty would be like, 10 000 words. Which would mess up my headcount. So yes, there's another chapter coming! And it won't be late, like this one!
I'm super happy to hear you guys want more, it's super encouraging!! Some have asked about a series, and I don't know! My muses are sporadic and bitchy and won't let me know. Maybe?
Anyway, thank you so so much for your support and wonderful comments, you make me wanna cry!! <3<3<3
ps. what Bruce tells Damian about fear is a bastardization of a quote by Nelson Mandela. It's a very good quote.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce took one of the more discreet cars, just a normal-looking silver BMW, to the restaurant he'd told Talia to meet him at. Once he stepped out of the car in a nearby garage, he pinged Tim.

"So, um. How stupid do you think this is, on a scale from one to ten?" Tim asked him thoughtfully as soon as they connected. "I mean, logically I know you're very good hand-to-hand combatant, obviously, but Talia and you always do mind games and she keeps trying to kill you. You're either walking into a trap, or you're being played some other way, and I don't like either options.

"Are you in position?" Bruce asked, ignoring him. He knew this was... Something, that was for sure. An opportunity to pick at him until he cracked? A time to poison him? He didn't know. He had a bunch of antidotes in the inner pocket of his suit jacket, just in case.

"Yeah, across the street's there's pretty good cover. No transmissions or anything coming from the building, at least nothing that isn't a phonecall or anything. It's not Talia, though. She entered about fifteen minutes ago, and she's ordered wine. The expensive kind, probably."

"I mean, like I've previously said, she's a murderous witch and daughter of the literal fucking devil, but yeah, I'm sure she just wants to *chat*," Tim muttered, and Bruce ignored him again, walking down the street and into the large, exclusive restaurant.

The hostess immediately recognized him, of course, and told him his date had arrived already. He thanked her, and made his way over to the deep pits of the restaurant, where he found Talia sitting by one of the smaller tables.

Her hair was pinned up in a french twist with an ornate pin sticking keeping it together, and her dress was a shimmery burgundy color, clinging to her body in all the right places but with enough of a thigh-slit that she would be able to kick someone in the stomach without ripping it. At the end of those gorgeously tanned legs, she wore golden strappy heels, with enough of a heel that she could comfortably run in

them, but also pierce through someone's windpipe with them.

When he approached, she turned her head to look at him, and her lips were glossy and burgundy as well, her eyelids glittering gold. She stood up to greet him, her smile dangerous and warm at the same time, and they brushed kisses against each other's cheeks for a moment, keeping up the charade in public. Talia was one of those people who were so clearly a part of a crime-family or in this case, an assassins guild: she just exuded wealth and power, never tried to hide it. She embraced it instead.

They separated, and she sat back down, picking her glass of wine back up.

"Long time no see, beloved," she said sweetly.

"Same to you, Talia," Bruce agreed, sitting down. He could tell she had around six knives on her right now, and probably a gun or two. The pin in her hair was for stabbing someone's eye out, as well as keeping her hair up, obviously.

"Yeah, except for the part where she totally tried to kidnap the little demon like, four days ago," Tim's voice crackled in his ear, and suddenly Bruce missed Cassandra's radio-silence like nothing else. "How have you been?" Talia asked him, leaning back in her chair. "Good. The criminals have had too much time to roam unpunished. I've been clearing house," he said, meeting her green-looking eyes. She smirked at him, breathtakingly beautiful, and Bruce poured himself some of the wine from the bottle standing on the table. "Good year for Chardonnay."

"Mm," she agreed, eyes glowing like a predator as she stared at him. Just then, a waiter came by, showing them menus. Immediately, Bruce ordered today's special, no starters at all, but Talia wasn't one to follow anybody's lead except her father's, so she ordered some halloumi stuffed peppers, and fish to go with the wine.

As she spoke to the waiter, the comm in Bruce's ear crackled again.

"Hey, whoah, Jason," came Tim's surprised voice, and the detective forced his expression to remain neutral, well aware of Talia glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. He needed Tim focused, and a Tim fighting Jason was not a focused Tim. He had a spare suit of Bruce's up there, a belt, the bare essentials for Batman to make an appearance. Talia might want to keep them in public to lull him into a false sense of security, but that didn't mean he didn't come prepared.

The comms crackled again, and there was Jason's throaty laugh. He must've been tagged in.

"It's B and Talia? Oh, this is going to be a shitshow," he crowed. "Do you have any snacks with you for optimal movie-going, Timbo?"

"Shut up, I'm trying to listen!" Tim hissed.

"Alone, on my territory?" Bruce asked mildly when the waiter was out of earshot, and Talia shrugged, an easy roll of her shoulders.

"Who says I'm alone?" she inquired. Bruce stayed silent, and she rolled her eyes, in a startling imitation of Damian. They had the same eye-shape, the two of them, and their son's eye color was closer to hers than it was to his. "I'm not, beloved. You know me better than that. Gotham's not safe to walk alone in, an innocent young woman such as me."

Bruce exhaled. That probably meant she'd already killed someone here, tonight, and he pursed his lips at her.

"I'll check in the nearby alleys," came Jason's voice in his ear, too familiar with Talia to let that sort of comment slip by unnoticed, and the detective tilted his head at Talia as she swirled her wine around in her glass.

"You're far from helpless, Talia," he scoffed, leaning against the table. He wanted to tap his fingers against the tabletop, but that would be a nervous gesture, and Talia would jump on the opportunity immediately.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she purred, leaning forward as well, elbows on the table and with her chin in hand. Both narrowed their eyes at each other, and her playful smile turned into a little frown. She leaned back just the slightest bit, her nose wrinkling. "You smell like *him*."

"That's really none of your business, now, is it?" Bruce asked as his voice turned cold, not hesitating, and knowing exactly who she was talking about. Of course she would bring up Clark. He'd expected that.

"It is, the sort of people you bring around our son," she said, maybe a little sharper than she'd intended to, because she glanced around, and leaned back further in her chair in a forced show of casualness.

"You don't care about Damian at all. Don't try that with me," he said lowly.

"That's not true," Talia said fiercely. "He's my son as much as he is yours, if not more."

"You put a *knife* to his *throat*, Talia."

"Oh *please*. Did the great detective think to ask the child what he was playing?" she asked with pursed lips. At Bruce's non-reply, she rolled her eyes at him. "Of course not. The lion game consists of counting to twenty in five different languages after each other, and then going off with a stick in hand to poke around 'bushes', looking for lions, or me. Sometimes real bushes, sometimes pillows where I'd be hiding, blankets. It's sort of like hide and seek, except you don't win until you manage to poke with the stick in the lion's 'sensitive spot'. I made it up so he'd start caring about other languages and finding pressure points. The only thing that's ever dangerous about it is whatever he's holding. I had pressing matters."

"Pressing matters like getting away from me before I could kick your teeth in for putting him in danger like that?" Bruce asked, forcing himself to keep his voice calm.

"Getting away from your boyfriend, maybe," Talia said acidly. Bruce paused, taking in her tense, angry body language. Had she honestly thought they still had a chance? Even after their conversation in the middle of a cornfield with her holding their son hostage?

"Yeah, someone definitely got stabbed for trying to jump Talia earlier. Found a dead guy," Jason said in his ear, and Bruce pursed his lips.

"Murderer, that I know, but homophobe, Talia? I didn't take you for the sort," he said, putting his elbows on the table. A challenge. Talia's maroon lips quirked in a smile, her eyes flicking from where his elbows were touching the table, and up to his eyes.

"I'm tolerant. My league is mostly made up of men. I know what they do behind closed doors. Just as I know your mind, beloved. You don't trust him any more than you trust me. Truth is, you'll never trust anyone like you did me again."

Bruce considered that, and decided that Talia didn't have any right to say that in the first place. There was the crackle on the comm in his ear of Tim muttering 'yikes', and it was only Bruce's immense willpower and control over his body that wouldn't let him let out a

loud, angry sigh.

"You think murderers and tormenters are better men to keep around our son than a symbol of hope?" he asked Talia instead of paying any attention to Tim.

"More suited for his destiny, if only he'd done as I asked."

"You disowned him. That's on you, Talia." Her hazel-green eyes pierced through him, and she picked her drink up again.

"Yeah, you go, B," Tim said distantly in his ear, and Bruce ignored him.

"How is... Cassandra doing?" Talia asked, taking a sip. "Is she recovering?"

"Yes," Bruce agreed.

"She's a good warrior. Lesser women would drop dead at the mere contact of those poisons," she said, sounding mildly impressed in that special way of hers.

"She's good," Bruce hummed.

"I suppose after all those boys, you'd like a daughter," Talia smiled, and it wasn't barbed wire, rather a tenative smile. Talia wasn't very good at smiles without any malice, danger, or anger, which is why this smile immediately made Bruce suspicious.

"Really?" he said, without really thinking, wanting to see if Talia's expression would change. It remained steadfastly tenative and now awkward as she shifted with her usual grace but clutching her wine glass tightly.

"The Cain girl has more patience than any of your Robins. You're getting old, beloved, you can't keep up with someone as rash as a young boy. How's Jason doing?"

"Aw! Tell Talia I need money, if she's handing it out," Jason cooed, his voice mockingly loving and high-pitched. Bruce blinked slowly instead of sighing out loud.

"Breathing. And why do people insist I'm getting old? I'm not even forty," Bruce complained to see how far she'd drop her guard, and that made the tenative smile change into a sultry one. Not very far,

obviously.

"I, for one, like the salt and pepper look you're beginning to get, beloved."

"Quit it," Bruce said firmly, and the sultry smile turned into a wolfish grin that he associated with early days of getting to know her, which made his lips twitch in return. He felt that smile stir something old and buried in him.

The spark was there, but there would never be a flame again. Bruce could feel that in his very bones. She was his first true love, the mother of his child, and an old friend turned enemy, but nothing more. And she would never be anything more again. Talia seemed to realize that too at the same moment, and she pursed her lips, holding her glass out for a toast.

"To getting older," she said, her hazel eyes glowing in the candle-light, and Bruce clinked their glasses together.

"And wiser." Talia nodded once in acquiescence, and sipped her drink as the waiter came with their food.

They talked for almost an hour after dessert, about Damian's school, about his training, about Cassandra's lack of communication, and Tim being a huge hit in the corporate world. The thing that Bruce hated, absolutely *loathed*, about Talia was that when she wasn't trying to kill him, or fighting him, or taking over the world, she was wickedly funny, and smart, and very much still the woman he fell in love with. They could still get along well sometimes, as long as they steered away from pretty much anything concerning morals, crime rates, and her work.

Truth is, Bruce had sort of forgotten what it felt like to talk to another adult that wasn't Clark. He needed to take some Watchtower time, preferably tomorrow, maybe teach some recruits, scare the crap out of the Flash or hide Ollie's arrows. J'onn would probably enjoy a philosophical conversation with him or something. Talia noticed it too, and laughed at him, the sweet, slightly higher-pitched one that meant she wasn't faking it, or making it up. It really was a wonderful laugh, and with the full unstoppable force of Talia's affections directed at him tonight, Bruce could forgive his younger, less controlled self for falling for her.

"Oh, Bruce," she crooned, a strand of hair having torn it's way out from her nice hairdo and waving in her face. "You need to talk to more people. How you manage to keep up a front as a charming, wonderful playboy when you can't even talk to women, let along get it up for one anymore, is really shocking."

"Gross," Tim groaned, as Jason moaned about 'TMI'. He was pretty sure he no longer had any need for back up, but he couldn't tell them to leave without calling attention to them, and he preferred it when Talia was looking at him. He was a matador, of sorts. Guiding the bull away from other innocent bystanders.

"As long as the rest of the world buys it, it's fine by me," Bruce shrugged.

"When Damian takes over your company, he is not going to be as ditzy as you," she pointed out. "He's too smart."

"I think he's a little too haughty, really. Can't handle people thinking he can't do something. Much like his mother," he fired back. Talia shrugged a shoulder, her smirk beautiful and sneaky.

"Al Ghuls are proud."

"So are Waynes. Just not on your level." She hummed at him, and looked down into the bottom of her wine glass. Then, her beautiful hazel-green eyes met his again, and she smiled.

"Sometimes..." she began, and then pressed her lips together like she was thinking, considering her words. Worrisome. She always thought things through, but putting on a show? Definitely cause for concern. Bruce braced himself. "Sometimes, I think that's too bad. A little more pride in yourself and your city and you might get down and do the dirty work here in Gotham. The real dirty work. Like Jason dares to. He's the only one in your family that really loves Gotham for what it is: A cesspool filled with crime, blood, and guns."

Bruce smiled at her, and Talia's smile was small and genuine in comparison.

"If you take a single step into this city after tonight, I promise you, Talia, there will be no hesitation on my part to clean up. You say I don't love Gotham? Fine. But you don't know Gotham. You don't belong in Gotham," he said slowly, dangerously. Talia's smile became smaller. "With your 'pride', it would *eat you alive*, and you know what?" She wasn't smiling anymore as Bruce leaned closer, lowered

his voice to the point where it looked like he might be whispering sweet nothings to her. "I would *let* it."

He leaned back again, and rose as he heard Tim wolf-whistling in his ear, pulling his wallet out of his pocket and tossing a couple of hundred dollar bills on the table (with an added incredibly high tip, no doubt). The billionaire took another hundred dollar bill out of his wallet, folding it twice, before tossing it at Talia, who crumpled the bill in her fist.

"For the cab-ride out of Gotham. This has been a lovely evening. Take care, Talia," Bruce offered, feeling her murderous eyes on the back of his neck as he walked over to get his coat, before exiting the restaurant.

"Wow. That was nice. Maybe you shouldn't have, but that was viciously satisfying, even second-hand," Tim said, definitely grinning. Bruce exhaled, stretching his fingers out from their clenched position, and rolled his shoulders underneath his light coat.

"Have you been compromised?" he asked.

"Oh, her face is priceless!" Jason cackled. "Damn. I've gotta give her a call. It's been too long."

"I advise against that. She'll probably kill you," Bruce said as he walked into the car garage again, walking right past his car and over to the roof access. He shimmied the door open, locking it behind him as he began to climb the stairs. "She doesn't hesitate."

"No, no, I know that," Jason said thoughtfully. "Just, y'know. I could use the money."

"I'll have Alfred transfer some to your Jack Jones account," Bruce replied without hesitation.

"Not *your* money, and fucking stop snooping!" Jason exclaimed. "No thanks."

"You need money, I have money. Problem solved. Let me *help* you," Bruce growled, kicking the door to the roof access open in a rare show of frustration.

The door slammed open to show Jason and Tim sitting on the roof, hiding behind the two foot high ledge. There was a set of binoculars lying on the ledge about three yards to the left, probably transmitting

the visual to Tim for extra protection. Tim was holding a smaller screen in hand and sipping a drink. There was the remains of a Taco Bell meal around the two of them, and Jason was still licking sauce off of his glove. That wasn't sanitary.

"Christ. Kicking down a door in that suit? Be fucking careful, of Alfred's gonna kill you," Jason marveled after a moment of stunned silence on all parts.

"If you need money, just ask. We'll set you up with a black card," Bruce said, calmly this time, fixing his shirtcuffs and the button on his suit. "Red Robin?"

"Here," Tim said, rolling away from where he'd been leaning against the edge, and kicking a suitcase over to him. He glanced down at the little screen in hand and pursed his lips. "There she goes. Hopefully she doesn't kill anyone on her way out. I'm so glad you're dating Supes now."

"Yeah, Talia deserves better than you. So does Supes, obviously, but free choice I guess," Jason scowled, rolling to his feet as Bruce grabbed the suitcase and stepped back into the staircase.

After a moment, the Batman appeared, and he peered over the edge down at the car Talia was stepping into.

"Batgirl?" he hailed, and Barbara hummed in response. "Have you got eyes on Talia's car?"

"Not yet. Want me to make sure she gets out of here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" Barbara demanded. She obviously wasn't happy with him about wanting to talk to Kara, and Bruce exhaled to regain some patience.

"Yes, please," he growled out, and he could hear her victorious smirk.

"Right. I've got eyes. I'm on it, B," she agreed.

"Let me know. I'm sure Robin's practically vibrating with the need to go out by now," Bruce replied, and Barbara laughed.

"You got it," she affirmed, signing off with a chirp. Jason made a 'whoo-psh' noise, probably meant to imitate a whip from the gesture

he also did, and Tim sniggered into his palm.

"Red Hood. Do you require assistance?" Batman asked coolly, and Jason shrugged.

"Not really. Roy's in town, I'm cleaning up my territory. Got a meth lab down the street from here, actually," he replied, nodding over to the building next to them. "Thought I'd take it down tonight."

"Not if you're going to kill anyone," Bruce stated firmly, unbudging, and the shiny helmet cocked to one side, and then the other.

"Funny thing, that," Jason hummed thoughtfully. "I don't take orders from you."

Without any warning, he'd pulled and cocked his gun, and both Bruce and Tim jumped into a defensive stance. Before either had the time to react further, the gun fired a shot, and Tim yelped as it hit him right in the chest plate. He collapsed, and the gun was out of Jason's hand in a second, Bruce pressing him down against the rooftop and making the helmet come off and roll away in the process.

"Jason," Bruce growled, and was ready to press the hail for the batmobile so Alfred could sew up whatever organ Jason had just crushed in Tim's ribcage. He was shot point-blank, at most five meters away, kevlar only does so much when you're that close-

There was a groan from Tim, as he sat up, a thumb digging into the plate covering his pec, and pulling a bullet out. No blood, only Tim's angry flash of teeth.

"Rubber bullets," Jason laughed into the roof, twisting his head enough that Bruce could catch a glimpse of his wicked grin. "Don't you trust me, B?"

"You shot me to prove a point?" Tim exclaimed, rolling to his feet and snapping out his bo-staff. "I haven't had to repair a suit in ages, shithead! Alfred's gonna be so pissed with me."

"It was so worth it for the look on your face!" Jason grinned, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter and adrenaline. Bruce let go of his arms, and Red Hood rolled to his feet easily, grabbing his gun from the ground as he went. Tim whacked him in the side with the bo staff, making him laugh. Jason caught the next swipe with his armguard, and dodged the third rolling away.

He grabbed his helmet, grinning at Tim before he shoved it back onto his head and made for the other side of the building.

"See ya, suckers!" Jason shouted as he dove over the ledge.

"Dinner at Ma Kent's in two weeks," Bruce called after him, and as Jason landed on the rooftop on the buliding across from theirs, he flipped the two of them off. Bruce was sure he'd show up then, either way. He'd made a promise, and Jason had caved. He wouldn't have made the switch if Bruce hadn't made a tempting deal.

While Tim shouted at Jason and flipped him off right back, the Batman suppressed his smile, and rolled his shoulders. He believed in redeption, always would want to believe in the better of people, but he'd spent a lot of sleepless nights thinking about Jason, about whether he would ever come back to him, and this, this was a step on the way. He swallowed down the ridiculous sensation of a lump of happy tears in his throat and turned away from the ledge, beckoning the still furious Tim to him with the simple swish of his cape.

Clark set the roses in water the moment he came home, and then made himself dinner, easy pasta and a simple tomato sauce. After that, he skyped Kara out in Californa. She agreed to meet him at the Watchtower tomorrow late afternoon, but looked very suspicious about it. Hopefully she'd tell Barbara, so Clark wouldn't have to drag two angry bats out of bed tomorrow.

After that, he flew up to the Watchtower, stopping just outside the airlock to bask in the light from the sun. They were pretty goddamn far away from it, but still closer than on Earth, and Clark enjoyed the tickling sensation of sunbeams hitting his skin and filling him with energy. He took a lap around the Watchtower just to burn some off, before he finally zoomed in, and was met with Diana, in full Wonder Woman gear, grinning at him.

They had coffee and pizza with Green Lantern and Flash, before she offered him a sparring-session. Clark agreed. Then she procceeded to wipe the floor with him for a while. He would've put up more of a fight, except... Bruce was going out on a date with his ex. Couldn't blame Clark for being a little distracted.

Honestly, he hadn't even contemplated going back to surprise Bruce before Diana had suggested it. To make him 'stop moping', she claimed. Flash handed GL a twenty-dollar bill when Diana suggested

it, pouting, and Hal just grinned at his friend, smacking a kiss onto the bill with a loud 'Told you so!'

"Can't believe Nightwing's stupid plan worked," he grumbled, and shoved a whole other pizza down his throat.

"I don't know, Diana," Clark said silently, swallowing at the uncomfortable tug in his stomach, thinking about Bruce and Talia, sitting across from each other at a candle-lit, romantic dinner table. "I just- always take the initiative, y'know?" He thought back to what Tim had said. "Pretty much... Always."

"That's just Batman though," Hal shrugged, shoving the bill into a pocket on his suit. "The freak's just like that, doesn't even notice when he hasn't been here for over two weeks, and gets angry whenever you point it out."

"Batman is a valuable member of the team and a treasured friend of mine," Diana said fiercely, sitting up a little straighter. Immediately Hal was pressed back into his seat with the sheer impact of her level look and ringing voice. "Would you like to bad-mouth him any more?"

"Nope, all good, no need!" he hurried to say. When Diana looked away from him, he mouthed 'christ' to Barry, who only snickered.

"He is right about one thing though: B can be... a bit uncommunicative," Barry said carefully.

"Yeah, you're right. He never calls me. If I just don't call him, he probably won't call me at all! He probably wouldn't even notice!" Clark pouted, feeling a little disheartened. Maybe Bruce didn't even want to be with him at all, a little voice inside him nagged. Diana sighed.

"He's very involved in his work. A quality you've told me you admire, many times," she pointed out. "He's very dedicated and headstrong. He always comes when it's about rescuing the world."

"Maybe I should, y'know! Stop calling, that is. Just to see if he'd even notice. Just, not- not call him," Clark declared, halfway to himself and cleary not listening to her, and Diana had that look on her face like she couldn't believe mankind was still alive, to this day.

"That's *childish* of you, Kal. Talk to him instead. You knew what you signed up for when you became friends with him, and when you became his lover. He isn't a very affectionate man, as it is."

"No, he is," Clark protested profusely. "He can be so, so affectionate, and he's usually very attentive."

"I think this is one of those times when your son has more wisdom than you," she murmured in thought. "Kon-El is surprisingly more mature than you, in this instance."

"Hey!"

"It's true. How long haven't B's kid and he been going out?" Barry pointed out. "Like, ages. Tops two years since after he came out of his pod, they were already together. That's a good couple of years, in comparison to the two of you, who have been dancing around each other forever."

"That's just- that's not-" Clark sputtered, but shut up when Diana quirked an eyebrow at him and crossed her impressive arms over her emblem.

"With the bats, it's all about patience, apparently," Barry continued, waving his hand through the air expansively. "A lot of it. And apparently a lot of missed dates, and realizing they honestly don't know they're doing it because they've been swallowed up by a case."

"And how the hell would you know?" Hal questioned incredulously.

"Wally used to mope a lot about it, back in the day," he shrugged easily.

Clark had wondered about that, actually. He obviously had no clue who was dating who, especially within the superhero community. The kids who used to be sidekicks were no longer sidekicks and instead young adults, and they jumped each other left and right. For all he knew, Wally and Dick could be together now.

Besides, Diana was right. She was right an overwhelming amount of the time. He was being childish. He should talk to Bruce, and voice his concerns. Lois had said that both of their problem was that they kept a little too much inside. It would lay and fester until she'd lash out at him, or he'd take off in the middle of a fight to go to the Fortress. Both the little voice in his head that sounded like Lois yelling at him, and Diana's raised eyebrows made him feel a little like he should take action, after all.

So there he was, wearing a pair of Bruce's black underwear and feeling distinctly nervous. That part was on Hal and Barry, really, making him

think it would soften the blow of the serious conversation they should have if he was pretty much naked. Stupid idea. Clark should never ever listen to them again.

Sure, Bruce might think it was romantic, but he might tell Clark to leave, he might laugh at him, especially at the way he was splayed out on the bed, and the risk that Clark was sent flying home in the midle of the night because Bruce was too upset with his ex to want to be with him tonight was just too darn high. Oh, this was a bad idea. They could have this discussion tomorrow.

Clark hopped off the bed, and went looking for his clothes, the flush on his cheeks high with shame. Suddenly he heard heavy steps in the staircase, and he froze like a deer in headlights, using his super-speed to fly back onto the covers, trying to get into a semblance of a casual position just as the door opened.

Bruce's top two buttons of his shirt were open, some of that magnificent chest hair peeking out, and that usually would've meant he was relaxed, but the look on his face the fraction of a second before he saw Clark seemed brooding, a little angry maybe. When he saw Clark, however, his face blanked, and he blinked a couple of times.

"Hi," Clark said a little awkwardly. Bruce stepped into the room, closing the door behind him and leaning against it. The room was silent for a while, and Clark wondered if he should leave, feeling awkward and incredulously enough too big for the bed he was on, clumsy and huge.

"God, you're a fucking sight for sore eyes," Bruce finally exhaled, kicking off his shoes. Clark let out a startled laugh.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Bruce growled, crawling up on the bed towards the now giggling Clark.

"How did it go with Ta-" he began, but was interrupted by Bruce's lips pressing against his, Bruce's calloused fingers sliding up the nape of his neck to curl into his hair, tilting his head back.

"Please don't ever take over a crime imperium from your dad and try to kill me and then steal DNA for our offspring," Bruce said when he pulled back. Laughter bubbled out of Clark's chest.

"Very specific request. Think I'm in the clear," he grinned, and Bruce

groaned, pressing his forehead against Clark's shoulder to gather strength. "How did it go?"

"Fine, I think. I might've pissed her off in the end. Babs and Steph are herding her out of Gotham as we speak," he sighed, sitting back up.

"Yeah? Are you in for the night, or just coming up to change into something that isn't a very nice suit, big guy?" Clark asked, smiling up at him.

Bruce considered that. The Mission always came first, always had. Came before his own well-being, came before any romantic partner, came before anything that decided to get in its way.

He looked down at Clark, naked save for a pair of underwear that was Bruce's he realized at a second glance. The reporter kept stroking up Bruce's back gently, his fingertips making little waves over the fabric as he went. The look of sheer quiet contentment in Clark's eyes nearly startled Bruce, and he blinked in surprise at the fact that Clark probably wouldn't even blame him if he wanted to go back out.

Clark was like that, most of the time, and Bruce felt a wave of gratefulness wash over him. Clark, being Superman, would understand it if he wanted to patrol. Most of his other romantic partners had found him distant and too absorbed in his work, but Clark would understand, because he had the same job: making the world a safer place.

Clark reflected on that as well, as his eyes traced the line of his partner's shoulders. Bruce wasn't the only one who would have to skip dates. Lois hadn't complained when Superman had been needed in the middle of dinner, not really, but she had that silently hurt look, like she knew she couldn't put the rest of the world over their date-night without making the both of them feel guilty.

Clark shouldn't yell at him about missing a date once in a while because of being on a surveilance mission, and he wouldn't demand Bruce hand over his black card, or keep him in bed when he absolutely had to *move*, or else his body would combust. They knew each other better than that, knew that while Bruce might not be the best boyfriend, he was *trying*, wasn't blowing him off because he wanted to play games, but maybe because he'd been awake for too long and couldn't keep himself awake another second. They knew that Clark couldn't just ignore a cry for help, that while the world might try to separate them at every turn, by being stubborn and putting

effort into each other, maybe they could overcome that. Maybe this relationship wouldn't crash and burn.

Maybe Bruce wouldn't crash and burn if Batman took the rest of the night off.

"Hmmm. No, I'm good here," Bruce finally said, and Clark smiled a little wider. not so much feeling relief as just happiness. He'd really let his insecurities get the better of him earlier. Of course Bruce wouldn't forget him just because he didn't call. He cupped the back of Bruce's head to bring him back down for a sweet kiss.

"You'll hear no complaints from me," he agreed quietly when the kiss broke, and Bruce exhaled a breath that it felt like he'd been holding all night when Clark squeezed his neck. "Want to go grab some warm milk?"

"Now?" Bruce blinked, looking down at their prone position. A shift of hips and they could be doing other, equally relaxing, things.

"Yeah. You need sleep," Clark murmured, sitting up and giving Bruce a quick peck on the cheek. "You've had a rough day."

"Oh my god, you're worse than Alfred," Bruce marveled, and Clark rolled his eyes at him fondly, lifting Bruce back up onto his feet like he weighed nothing. While Batman would've punched him for that, Bruce internally wondered just how much he could pull on Clark's firm grasp without the other man releasing him. Hmmm. Something to be explored another day.

Clark wrapped up in Bruce's bathrobe, and they made a funny-looking pair as they stepped out of the room, glancing around the hall like they would be caught when nobody else was even upstairs.

When the Man of Steel began to lead the way towards the kitchen, Bruce felt a flare of anxiety in his stomach. Could Gotham really manage without him one more day? Maybe he should go out anyway. Mission comes first, after all. But Clark. Maybe he'd leave him? He wasn't as dedicated as Clark, wasn't as good-

As if hearing his mild panic, Clark's head turned, and the reporter eyed him.

"Are you okay, Bruce?" When Bruce didn't answer, Clark cupped his cheek gently, and met his eyes. "Hey. If you wanna go, you can go. I'll be here when you get back. Promise."

At that, Bruce fiercely stomped that fear back down. Clark wasn't going to leave him if he went out. That was just silly. He should know better.

Besides, if there was something big going down tonight, he would've heard whispers. He considered that it was a pretty good thing, having trained so many people to his standards: he wasn't fighting for his cause alone. He could take a single night off without there being consequences.

"No. No, I'm good," Bruce rumbled, before clearing his throat. "...Thank you."

"'Course, sweetums," Clark teased, and Bruce groaned, rolling his eyes at his lover, just as the reporter let out a little chuckle that made him feel warm, all the way down from his toes, up to the top of his head. Talia was wrong. He could trust Clark, more than he ever should have trusted her. "Wanna hear what Tim said earlier?"

"Do I?" Bruce questioned, and Clark huffed.

"That I should make you work for it."

"Work for it?" he mused.

"Yeah. Like, fancy restaurants, flashy cars. The works," Clark said, tossing him a grin over his shoulder. "Since we have lost time to make up for."

"Really." Why were his kids so obsessed with his lovelife? You'd think he never had any relationships at all, with the way they kept giving Clark advice, and Dick arranging all of this in the first place.

"I mean, I don't know if I'd like all that, and the press would be... insufferable, which I know, as a member of the press and with knowing Cat Grant, but some effort is always appreciated, in any relationship, obviously. Equal effort, preferably," Clark floundered a little. The billionaire allowed himself a secret little smile at the thought of Cat Grant's disgustingly curious face, and at the slight flush coloring the tips of Clark's ears.

"A thousand roses sent to your office it is," Bruce agreed sweetly.

"Whoa, maybe not. I wouldn't be able to fit in my cubicle if you did that!" Clark laughed, but there was enough of a wistful glint in his eyes that Bruce made a mental note to ask his secretary to set it up.

"Bruce. I'm serious."

"Hmmm," he hummed, crowding up behind Clark and pressing his nose to the back of his neck. Talia's cloying perfume had been sticking in his nose all evening, but one whiff of Clark, and he felt something settle deep inside him, the scent being replaced with Clark's cheap cologne and laundry detergent. Same as his mother used.

"If you're going to be difficult about it, at least add some of Alfred's cookies to the mix," Clark huffed, and Bruce hummed in agreement, reluctantly pulling away to nudge the reporter forward.

He could do that. He could most definitely do that. Clark deserved the effort, and Bruce could go the distance. As soon as he'd had some sleep, and time to regroup his thoughts on Talia, and what Jason had pulled tonight, he would make goddamn sure Clark knew just how much he appreciated having him with him.

For now though, he'd just follow the beaming Clark down the stairs, their fingers loosely grasping each others'.

Chapter End Notes

And we're finally done.
Thank you an insane amount for your astounding support and wonderfully curious comments!!! Getting to talk to you guys about my work and watching you interact is like, the wildest thing, I still can't believe I have so many amazing people reading and wanting to share their thoughts on this silly little thing!!!
While I don't wanna swear on a series or anything, I will definitely return to the Superbat tag to try and write more. Since I feel like a sizeable part of Bruce's personality is affected by his kids, they will without any doubt appear in whatever I write in the future as well.
Once again, thank you so much, you're all wonderful, and I hope you've enjoyed this work!! <3<3<3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!